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FATAL KISSES

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(in History and Tradition)

By

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Author of "Strange Disappearances,"
"Strange Sea Mysteries," etc.



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CHAPTER I

NUZZLY THE BEAUTIFUL

ABOUT ten o'clock one evening, in the year 1824, two men stood on the verandah of a newly-built hotel in Cairo, gazing reflectively at the great river Nile, glittering like some huge snake in the distance.

"How gorgeous these nights are, O'Neill," said the elder of the two, a slightly built man of about thirty years of age, with dark hair and eyes and small, delicately-moulded features, more like a woman's than a man's. "This breeze," and he sniffed the air, "slight though it be, is wonderfully refreshing after the intense heat ; and how joyously the river sparkles ! Beautiful, isn't it ?"

"I suppose so," the young man he addressed replied, "but to tell you the truth, Luigi, I'm a bit out of love with the Nile. I saw something very ugly in it this morning."

"Not a crocodile," Count Luigi laughed. "Crocodiles don't come so near the city."

"No, not a crocodile," O'Neill replied, pausing to knock the ashes out of his pipe, "a body, a human body, and what is more, the body of a white man!"

"A white man!" the Count ejaculated.

"Yes," O'Neill said, "a white man. And a nasty sight it was, too. His head had been pretty well sliced in two. And I should say, from the look of it, with a scimitar."

"Where did you see it?" the Count asked.

"Near the ferry," O'Neill replied. "I had been strolling about the gardens and avenues of the *Ez-Bekieh*, watching fat pashas and various other pompous individuals, members, I suppose, of the Egyptian nobility, driving about in their barouches, followed by armies of sooty-faced retainers, when, seized with a sudden desire to see the river, at close quarters, I made for the ferry, which, as you know, is in the old part of the city."

Here O'Neill paused again, this time to brush from his cheek with an exclamation of disgust, some long-legged, crawling insect of the night.

"On nearing the ferry," he went on, "I saw a crowd of Arab children looking at something in the water, and when I got up to them, of course I saw the body. Judging by the state of it, it must have been lying there some days."

"You don't know who it was?" the Count asked.

"I don't," O'Neill replied. "I've no idea. I expect he was killed by the Arnaoots. Haven't you heard?"

They're the terror of the town ! Only a day or two ago one of them stabbed a woman who wouldn't respond to his advances, and then shot the policeman who tried to arrest him ; and, just before that, a Frenchman at Moulak was nearly pistolled to death, because he remonstrated with a couple of them for making too much noise in his café."

"The Pasha ought to serve them as he did the Mamukes," the Count observed. "But seriously, if what you say is true, we shall have to be on our guard, O'Neill."

Before O'Neill could reply an elderly European, who had approached them unobserved, suddenly chipped in.

"It's not fair to blame the Arnoots for all the crimes in this city," he remarked. "Mehemet's daughter,* the Princess Nuzzly, is responsible for quite a number of them."

"The Princess Nuzzly !" O'Neill ejaculated. "Why you can't mean it. She's very lovely, isn't she ?"

"Undoubtedly," Captain Husant replied, "but that does not prevent her being wicked. If there is any truth in history, Cleopatra and also Isabella, the wife of poor Edward II. were beautiful women, but they were none the less infamous."

"That is so," O'Neill replied, "but tell me more about the Princess Nuzzly. She interests me. Have you seen her ?"

* Mehemet Ali (1769-1849) Pasha or Viceroy of Egypt during the early part of last century.

"Once," Captain Husant said. "She acts as *Bach-Kiatibi* or private secretary to her father, and to do her credit she is extraordinarily capable. The Pasha's greatest curse is his ambition, you know, he resembles Napoleon in that respect, and he would have come to grief many times, had it not been for the cool judgment of Nuzzly. She is a born diplomat."

"A combination of Cleopatra of Egypt and Elizabeth of England," Luigi laughed.

"Exactly," Captain Husant replied, "and if you add with a touch of Machiavelli, you've got her to perfection."

"But what is she like to look at?" O'Neill asked.

"A Peri," Captain Husant replied. "That is to say if you can conceive a Peri clad in the costume of a modern Turkish lady of rank."

"Dark, of course?"

"Yes, dark hair and eyes, but a wonderfully white skin and really lovely features. Unlike so many of the Turkish women one sees here, she is very slim and her hands, well, they are divine."

"By Jove, Captain," O'Neill laughed, "you have fired my curiosity. I must see her."

"That might not be difficult, but you'd better make your will first."

"Why, what nonsense," O'Neill laughed. "She can't be as bad as all that, she wouldn't kill me for just looking at her, would she?"

"Not with her own hands, perhaps," Captain Husant

replied, gravely, " but it's rumoured that quite a number of the bodies found in the river are those of men who have enjoyed the privilege of being in her company for a few hours."

" She evidently believes in the saying, ' Dead men tell no tales,' " Count Luigi remarked. " But why are the crimes attributed to her and not to her husband, Defterdar ? "

" Because," Captain Husant replied, " her amours are invariably carried on when Defterdar is away, either on some campaign or diplomatic mission. You wonder, perhaps, how I know so much. Well, one of my wife's friends, Madame Otto, who is also a friend of the Princess, and often at Court, has confided a good deal in my wife."

" I am going to see the Princess," O'Neill said emphatically.

" So am I," Count Luigi laughed.

" I suggested going to see her first and should have the first look in," O'Neill exclaimed.

" Granted," Luigi rejoined, " but I'm just as keen as you are. Come, be a sport, like most of your countrymen, and toss."

" Oh, all right," O'Neill replied, though somewhat reluctantly. " Here's a coin," and he produced a sovereign from his waistcoat pocket.

Count Luigi tossed the sovereign, and it came down ' tails.' He had won.

" My will is already made," he said laughing. " Now

all I have to do is to think of some excuse for presenting myself at the Palace. Captain, will you introduce me to Madame Otto ? ”

“ She’ll only tell me not to be a fool,” Captain Husant said diplomatically. “ It’s pure madness to attempt to see Nuzzly.”

“ Perhaps I am mad,” Count Luigi replied, “ but mad or not, my mind is made up. I mean to see Nuzzly ”

It was in vain that Captain Husant, who had been living in Cairo long enough to know something of its mysteries and secret dangers, tried to dissuade the Count from his purpose. The latter persisted, and as he continued to beg for an introduction to Madame Otto with all the persuasive eloquence he could command, which was a great deal, Captain Husant at length gave in and took him the following afternoon to Madame Otto’s villa near the French Consulate.

Now, directly Count Luigi was introduced to Madame Otto, with the promptness that characterized him, he at once declared the object of his visit.

“ Captain Husant,” he began, “ has given me such an alluring account of the Princess Nuzzly, who, if she is anything like his description of her, must be entrancing beyond words, that I am simply dying to see her.”

“ You’ll die, sure enough, if you do see her,” Captain Husant muttered grimly.

“ And you want me to help you ? ” Madame Otto exclaimed.

"I do," the Count replied, "and I shall be grateful beyond everything if you will."

"Don't, for Heaven's sake," Captain Husant interposed. "Tell him about those other fellows who have been fools enough to go to her Palace."

Madame Otto gladly complied with this request, and first of all told the Count the story of Major Bonivon. He insisted, she said, upon getting into the gardens of the Palace, in order to see the Princess, when she was walking about unveiled, and paid for this indiscretion with his life, his body being found, two days later, covered with wounds, in one of the deep pools of water left by the river's overflow, in the vicinity of the Palace grounds.

However, as neither this story, nor others she recounted, that were equally disastrous, had any effect on the Count, Madame Otto eventually yielded to his entreaties and offered to help him.

"I want," he said, "to visit the Princess in her Palace disguised as a lady. Now, don't laugh, because I am sure I should make a splendid woman. I am right as for size, my hands and feet are small, so are my features, and I don't at all mind shaving off my moustache and beard. There's my voice, of course, but it isn't very gruff, is it?"

"No," Madame Otto said thoughtfully, "that can be got over, but it's a wild, fantastic scheme, the wildest and most fantastic I have ever listened to, and it's a thousand to one it succeeds. But before I do anything at

all to further it, you must give me your word of honour that you won't let my name be mentioned in connection with it."

Count Luigi promised, and Madame Otto, who secretly admired him for his pluck and originality, then lent him some of her own clothes, giving him, at the same time, a few hints as to deportment and carriage.

He asked her to introduce him to the Princess as the Marquise de Savignol, but this she not unnaturally refused to do. Learning quite accidentally from her that the husband of a Levantine lady, who was an intimate friend of his wife's, was in the service of Mehemet Ali, a fact hitherto unknown to him, he subsequently took this lady into his confidence, too, but she also refused to give him the introduction he wanted.

"Write direct to the Princess," she said, "and tell her how much you would like to see her. She will very likely invite you to the Palace. But, under no circumstances mention my name. People have a knack of suddenly disappearing in Cairo, and I have no desire to be one of them."

Acting on her suggestion, Count Luigi wrote to the Princess under the name of the Marquise de Savignol, and in due course, much to his delight, received a letter from the Royal lady inviting him to pay her a visit at her new palace in the *Ez-Bekieh*.

The day fixed for the venture* found the Count, thanks

* A full account of the Count's escapade appears in "Life in a Harem," by Emmeline Lott.

to the help afforded him by Madame Otto and the Levantine lady, fully prepared and clad in a perfectly fitting velvet dress, trimmed with Mechlin lace, and wearing a wig, surmounted by an ultra fashionable white chip hat. He drove to the Palace in a carriage drawn by a pair of horses and preceded by two *sais* in long flowing garments. Six huge Eunuchs, looking alarmingly fierce in their bright red jackets and tarbooshes, stood on guard at the outer entrance, but as the visitor approached, they saluted and drew to one side. The carriage then passed through the gateway into a large courtyard and thence into a smaller courtyard, finally halting in front of a rectangular vestibule.

Here were grouped six Circassian slaves, extremely pretty and most brilliantly apparelled. Their jackets, open at the neck and reaching to the hips, were richly embroidered with gold and silver thread ; their trousers were of red and blue silk and had a hem at the bottom, through which ran a silk cord, that was drawn up and fastened round the leg, just above the ankle ; whilst their tiny slippers, in true Oriental fashion, shone and sparkled with precious stones. On their heads they wore small, velvet tarbooshes, which were most becoming, and round both wrists and ankles bangles and bracelets, set with almost priceless gems.

The Count, who was very susceptible to the charms of the fair sex, was entranced. He had never, even in his dreams, seen such a wonderful display of beauty, and the sight of so many lovely eyes fixed, as he knew them to be

fixed, quizzically on him, proved extremely embarrassing. However, it was too late to draw back now. Having got so far, willy nilly he would have to go through with it.

Realizing all this only too well, the Count forced himself to appear calm, and stepping out of the carriage in the most ladylike manner he could assume, he bowed graciously, perhaps a little too graciously, to the six pretty girls, and resigned himself almost cheerfully to their custody.

Up a beautiful white marble staircase they led him, on to a landing, where twelve more slaves, equally richly clad and equally beautiful, motioned to him to take a seat in their midst.

Directly he had done so, they began to take off his shoes, and as they thrust his feet into a pair of handsome Turkish boots, whether intentionally or otherwise, they tickled the soles of his feet so unmercifully that it was only by exercising the most supreme self-control that he could prevent himself screaming. That ordeal over, he was swathed from head to foot in a Cashmere shawl; and thus, feeling hot and uncomfortable, he was conducted by these slaves to the apartment in which the Princess had arranged to receive him.

On the way they passed through one suite of rooms after another, each suite more spacious and superbly decorated than the last. Now, despite the deadly risk he was running, the Count could not help being intensely interested in his surroundings. They presented a strange

blending of the West with the East. The mirrors on the walls, the lace curtains and hangings were unquestionably Parisian, while the carpets and divans (the costly trappings of the latter were embroidered with gold and studded with mother-of-pearl) were just as unquestionably Oriental. At every step he took, in fact, and no matter where he looked, the Count saw the oddest mixture imaginable of Paris and the Arabian Nights.

At length he arrived in the reception room that was to be used for this occasion. Compared with the rooms he had passed through, it was small, but it showed some attempt, at least, at a scheme of decoration. The fresco on the ceiling, though badly drawn, was painted in pleasing colours; the chairs, obviously French, and covered in a rich red morocco leather, harmonised to some extent with the walls, and the crimson curtains draping the French windows toned more or less with the colour of the room as a whole. All this, however, was barely noticed by the Count, whose attention was immediately transferred from the room to its occupants.

They consisted of about twenty or more old women and, probably, the same number of girls. Some of the latter were clad similarly to those who had escorted him, whilst others, apparently Abyssinians, judging by their handsome features and shapely hands and feet, were clad differently. Instead of trousers, they wore robes, albeit robes adorned with precious stones, and instead of tarbooshes, either plumes or feathers, or some sort of diamond ornaments on their heads, some of the latter

being in the shape of butterflies that, at each movement of the neck, seemed to flit about as though on the wing.

Amid all this beauty the old women struck a discordant note, for nearly all of them were negresses, very fat and quite repulsively ugly.

The Count felt that all eyes were fixed on him, watching his every movement, his very breathing in fact, and he now repented of the folly that had brought him to this pass. However, his repentance was not of long duration. A sudden stir among the slaves warned him of the approach of the Princess, and from the moment she entered the room, he had no eyes for anyone but her, and no thought of anyone or anything but her.

Built on slender lines, and perfectly proportioned, one might almost say she was symmetry itself. Her features, too, small and regular, recalled classic sculpture, saving that the eyes, large and dark, were suggestive of all kinds of passion. Like her slaves she had extremely lovely hands, the fingers white and tapering, and the nails long, rosy and almond-shaped.

She wore a white Cashmere dress, with loose sleeves, displaying her shapely arms, and an open front displaying silk trousers of a bright amaranthine hue. A band of pearls, fastened with large diamond clasps, encircled her waist, and her tiny feet were encased in a pair of satin slippers encrusted with rubies. Her hair, neatly plaited, was partly hidden by a fillet of golden-coloured cashmere, so cunningly arranged that it enhanced rather than disguised the shapely contour of her

head, whilst a number of gold bangles and bracelets together with a pearl necklace formed, in more senses than one, valuable adjuncts to an apparently already perfect costume.

Directly she had taken a seat, a slave brought her a pipe with an amber mouth piece, encrusted with gold and studded with diamonds, and then handed the Count a similar one. Coffee in thin Japanese cups was next served to each, and the Princess, who had never once removed her eyes from the Count, but kept regarding him with a look that struck terror in his heart, presently opened the conversation.* She spoke in Turkish, with which language the Count was fortunately familiar, and after inquiring after his health, asked if he had any children. To this the Count answered in the negative.

"I conclude, therefore," the Princess observed, putting down her cup, "that you are now journeying to Jerusalem to pray to your prophet to give you some."

"Your Highness, with singular astuteness, has guessed the object of my visit," the Count replied.

"May Allah grant you your desire," the Princess said, "for your husband will love you all the more if you have children. He will accompany you, of course."

She looked so fixedly at him, as if reading his very soul, that the Count, who up to the present had met her gaze without flinching, could no longer do so and was obliged to drop his eyes.

"No, your Highness," he said, in some confusion.

* At that time it was not etiquette in the East for a visitor to speak first.

“He is very much occupied just now with his business in Europe.”

“I’m sorry for that,” the Princess remarked, “because you will have to travel a long way alone, and that will be very trying for you, will it not ? ”

She still kept her eyes fixed on his face, and when he attempted to meet their gaze, he once again failed.

There was now a slight pause, during which the Count felt the very reverse of comfortable, and then the Princess began to talk politics, a subject in which Count Luigi was well known to be an adept. His suspicions, therefore, were aroused, and fearing the introduction of this subject might be merely a cunning device on Nuzzly’s part to make him give himself away (it was most unusual at that time for ladies, with the exception, perhaps, of the English and French, to discuss politics), in order to disarm her, he immediately evinced a keen interest in purely feminine things, and, to further prove his womanliness, commenced praising her jewellery. Later he begged her to let him see more of it, and she showed him a chest full of some of the most magnificent jewels in the world—emeralds as large as peas, topazes as big as hens’ eggs, huge rubies, splendid diamonds, including those on the crown of the Empress Josephine,* and innumerable bracelets, clasps and rings.

It was now that he made his first real blunder. He asked the Princess if she ever wore any of these beautiful jewels.

* Afterwards in an Egyptian harem.

“No,” she replied with a frown, “they are far too heavy. Besides, why should I?”

More than her actual words, the haughty look that accompanied them intimated to the Count that she did not consider she required any jewellery, no matter how costly, to add to her charms, since without it she was quite attractive enough. To have missed such an opportunity of paying homage was obviously a crime in the Princess’s eyes, and realizing his mistake, he tried to remedy it; but her piercing gaze rendered his belated attempt at a pretty speech futile and he relapsed into an ignominious silence.

No one spoke for some minutes. Then the Princess suddenly inquired if he would like to see the Harem. Hardly knowing now what to say for fear of giving still further offence, the Count stammered out an affirmative reply, whereupon the Princess rose and bidding him accompany her, walked out of the room, followed by her slaves, *en masse*.

The slaves’ quarters, through which the Count was led, comprised a number of small and rather stuffy rooms, separated from one another by thick curtains and looking out on to nothing but blank walls. In some of these rooms the furniture was strangely heterogeneous, common cane-seated chairs standing close to gilt-backed, drawing-room chairs, and plain deal tables rubbing shoulders with inlaid tables of a rare beauty and design.

A genial old woman, styled the mother of the Harem, in answer to the Count’s inquiry, informed him that there

were no bedsteads in any of these rooms, the slaves sleeping on mattresses, which were laid down at night and stowed away in lumber closets during the day. They slept, moreover, dressed exactly as they were in the day time, so as to be ready to attend the Princess, should she want them. There were flowers, musical instruments and sweets in these rooms, but no books, and no toilet requisites in evidence.

After viewing the slaves' quarters, the Count was taken into a large apartment to see some of them dance. A fairly large orchestra, composed, of course, entirely of girls, commenced playing as he entered. The music it produced was dull and monotonous, owing, no doubt, to the fact that a flute, an oud, or native guitar (the player striking the strings of this with a shell), and a tar, or big tambourine, were the only instruments played upon. At the same time, owing, perhaps, partly to the skill, and partly to the attractive personality of the players, the effect was not unpleasant.

Directly it ceased, the Princess ordered one of her favourite slaves to sing. In fear and trembling the wretched girl approached Nuzzly and kneeling down in front of her, kissed her tiny feet, begging to be excused, as she had a very bad cold.

"So be it then," the Princess exclaimed, her face suddenly becoming convulsed with an expression of the most fiendish cruelty, "remain for ever silent."

She kicked the unfortunate girl from her as she spoke and clapped her little hands twice.

At this signal, two huge eunuchs entered, and seizing the girl, dragged her, struggling desperately, out of the room. Hardly had the door closed on her, when the lashings of a courbache* were heard, and muffled screams, which a few seconds later gave place to groans, followed by a significant silence. The face of the Princess Nuzzly then relaxed into smiles, and she signalled to four girls, attired in red silk trousers and blue velvet jackets, to start dancing.

After they had danced for some time, to the accompaniment of copper castanets, a pretty, fair girl, her hair cut *à la Savoyard*, gave a solo dance *à la Taglione*, and every time she bounded past the Count, he fancied he caught a peculiar warning look in her half-closed eyes.

Other dances followed, and then violet, rose and jasmine sherbet, and all kinds of confectionery were handed to the Princess and himself. Meanwhile the Princess maintained absolute silence, and leaning back on her divan, with her pipe between her lips, continued to regard him with so strangely intent an expression that again he felt not a little apprehensive.

Presently, two slaves approached him, one holding an incense burner, and the other a silver vessel full of rose water ; and while the former wafted the smoke from the incense in his nostrils, the other sprinkled him with the contents of her bowl. Taking this to be a hint for him to depart, and feeling immensely relieved in consequence,

* A native whip, something like a Russian knout.

he rose and approaching the Princess, raised one of her hands to his lips to kiss.

Greatly to his consternation, however, instead of bidding him adieu, she invited him to accompany her to the Palace Gardens. He could not, of course, refuse. As soon as they were out of doors, she dispensed with her female retinue and sending the eunuch guard on in advance, took the Count by the hand and walked by his side.

This was by far the worst ordeal he had so far undergone. He was conscious she was watching his every movement, and he was in momentary terror of betraying himself by his walk. In order to divert her attention, he remarked upon the beautiful flowers, praising their perfume and colouring.

The Princess then dropped his hand, and turning towards him, stopped short.

"Do you suppose for one moment," she said, in staccato tones, "you have deceived me. If my husband, the Prince Defterdar, were to discover you here, he would have you impaled alive."

This, of course, came as a complete surprise. Although he had certainly been in constant fear of giving himself away, he had, on the other hand, only just assured himself that, at least up to the present, he had not done so. He could therefore think of nothing to say ; and after an awkward pause, stammered out something to the effect that he would risk body and soul, any day of the week, to get but a glimpse of one so dazzlingly fair.

At this the Princess smiled and said she admired nothing so much as bravery. Would he, to prove his courage, come to see her again that night ?

Overcome with joy at having appeased her, and revelling in the prospect of seeing her again so soon, the Count at once assented. The Princess then proceeded to give him directions. He must come to the Elfy Gate near the Mogreb an hour after sunset. He would see there an eunuch, who would tap him on the shoulder and conduct him to a kiosk, where she, the Princess, would speedily join him. After having told him all this, she bade him good-bye in the most friendly manner possible, playfully expressing her extreme pleasure at having met a lady so clever and altogether charming.

As soon as he reached the hotel he was staying at, the Count made preparations for his nocturnal venture. He bought a Damascus scimitar, and arming himself, in addition, with a poniard and a couple of good pistols, concealed all these weapons under his cloak. Then, at the appointed time, he presented himself at the Elfy Gate. No one was there, but, after waiting some minutes, a tall negro suddenly emerged from the gloom, tapped him on the shoulder, and then commenced walking in the direction of Boulak.

The Count at once followed. Down all sorts of queer alleys and footways his guide led him, until they came to a high stone wall, that, apparently, ran parallel with the banks of the Nile, for some distance. Here the Negro

stopped, and unlocking a green door in the wall, led the Count into what appeared to be a vast garden.

With one hand on a pistol and all his faculties very much on the alert, the Count followed his guide down an avenue composed of a variety of palms and other Oriental trees, that stood all silent and still in the starlight.

A stiller night the Count had never known. There was no sound, neither the rustle of a leaf, nor the creaking of a branch, nor the buzzing of an insect. At last they came to a kiosk, standing under the shadow of a cluster of tall trees. Here the Negro halted and throwing open the door of the kiosk, motioned to the Count to enter. The moment the count did so, the door closed behind him and he found himself alone in the darkness.

Cursing himself for his folly at being led into such a trap, the Count was about to strike a light to take stock of his surroundings, when a pair of soft arms were thrown round his neck and a voice, which he at once identified as that of the Princess Nuzzly, exclaimed :

“I am delighted, dearest, that you have come.”

In an instant his fears vanished and he allowed himself to be led by the Princess to the most luxurious divan.

“If I were to tell you that one kiss from my lips meant death, your death,” the Princess Nuzzly said, as she nestled down by his side, and laid one of her little hands on his, “would you deny me the joy of kissing you ? ”

“I would deny you nothing,” he replied, gallantly.

A slight noise, like a stealthy footstep on the path outside, caused him to start slightly.

"What was that ? " he asked, leaning forward and listening.

"Nothing," the Princess laughed, pulling him back gently. "It was only one of my pets, either a dog or a monkey. I keep a regular menagerie here."

Her lips then met his in one long, passionate kiss.

The dawn was beginning to break and the dark shadows of the night to pale, when the Princess at last disengaged herself from the Count's embraces and told him it was time for him to go.

"Just one more kiss, my adorable Princess," he pleaded. "Just one."

"Well, it must be only one," Nuzzly replied, and as she smiled again, their lips met, long and lovingly.

"Till to-night," she panted, "to-night, in the same place and at the same hour. Mind you keep our tryst and do not disappoint me."

She pushed him gently out of the kiosk, as she spoke, and closed the door.

The next moment a heavy hand fell on his shoulder, and on turning round, he perceived his former guide.

As before the Negro signalled to him to follow and then set off down one of the paths leading to the high wall.

"How ridiculous those tales about the Princess are," the Count said to himself, as he strode along. "No one could have been more loving and gentle. Murder anyone ! Why, she wouldn't hurt a fly."

He was still thinking of her many charms and dwelling

in his mind on the delightful time he had spent in her company, when the creaking of sakiehs* informed him the Nile was close at hand. The dawn had now broken and he could see, at no great distance, the high garden wall, and standing in front of it, three huge blacks with drawn scimitars, the blades of which glittered in the grey of the early morning.

Realizing there was not a moment to lose and that if he wanted to escape he must act quickly, he took advantage of a sudden bend in the path, which hid him from the observation of the three blacks, to draw his poniard and plunge it into the heart of his guide. He then searched the body for the key of the garden door, and luckily found it in one of the dead man's pockets. He then made a dash for the door and was inserting the key in the lock, when the three blacks came rushing down on him, their eyeballs gleaming and rolling in the most furious fashion. Fortunately, the Count was the possessor of a very cool brain ; he rarely, if ever, got flurried, and never did his steady nerves render him better service than now. Drawing one of his pistols, he took deliberate aim at the nearest black and fired, and then, almost before the body of the wretched man had hit the ground, the Count fired again, this time at the second black. The third, seeing both his comrades rendered *hors de combat*, took to his heels and fled. Fearing reinforcements might arrive any moment, the Count now lost no time in unlocking the garden door, and did not

* Persian wheels used in various Eastern countries for raising water.

feel in any degree safe till he had reached his hotel. There he met O'Neill, to whom he narrated his adventure.

"I'll remember that door in the wall," O'Neill remarked, when the Count had finished. "But, perhaps, she will employ other methods."

"What!" the Count exclaimed. "You don't mean to say you still intend seeing her!"

"Rather!" O'Neill replied. "What you have said has only whetted my appetite. Life holds out no inducements to me and a kiss from a woman like Nuzzly would more than compensate me for a speedy death."

The Count argued, but it was of no use. O'Neill turned a deaf ear and expressed his determination to see the Princess within the next few days.

Whether he actually accomplished his desire, the Count never knew, but his dead body, covered with wounds and found on the mud banks of the river, close to the Princess's garden, suggested that he had, at least, made the attempt.

CHAPTER II

QUEEN ELIZABETH AND THE O'ROURKE

THE O'Rourkes of Brefni* (whose headquarters, for many centuries, was a castle, most romantically situated on the banks of a swift-flowing river near Manor-Hamilton in the County of Leitrim), being one of the oldest and most illustrious families in Ireland, there are naturally many legends and traditions associated with them; and as two at least of these traditions are illustrative of my subject, fatal kisses, I have selected the aforesaid two for inclusion in this volume.

The one centring round Elgiva O'Rourke, commonly known as the Flower of Brefni, I will now narrate in brief, since it has many times been recorded in full by me elsewhere, and in any case is too well known to warrant a lengthy treatment here.

In the Middle Ages there lived in a large castle near Mitchellstown one Maurice Fitzgerald, a man of might, being the owner of n^t v^h land, but feared and disliked by all the neighbouring families, on account of his harsh-

* One of my ancestors was Bridget O'Rourke a scion of the House of Brefni.
See "The Romance of the Aristocracy," by Sir Bernard Burke.

ness and cruelty, which was only too apparent in his dealings with the O'Rourkes of Brefni, between whom and himself there existed a long-standing feud. He was, therefore, always on the look out for some excuse, however paltry, to attack a member of this clan ; and one day, one of his retainers, knowing his weakness and anxious to curry favour with him, meanly informed him that Elgiva, daughter of the O'Rourke of Brefni, was located on his territory, being at that moment an inmate of the Abbey of Kilmallock.

"Ten thousand devils," Maurice Fitzgerald thundered. "Saddle my horse at once and I will have her brought here immediately by force."

A few hours later and Elgiva O'Rourke was riding towards the castle of the Fitzgeralds, under a strong escort of armed warriors, her friend and guardian, the Abbess of Kilmallock, having been compelled to surrender her on threat of death.

All the same, it seems, Maurice Fitzgerald was kind to her. He allotted comfortable quarters for her use in his castle, and although he certainly kept her a close prisoner, he treated her with no small amount of consideration.

Thus affairs went on quite smoothly till his son and heir, Maurice, chancing to see the fair Elgiva looking out of her window, immediately fell in love with her. His sentiments were reciprocated, and every evening, as soon as it was dusk, he used to stand under the window of the castle and converse with the captive. Eventually

they decided to elope, and all might have gone well, had not a prying retainer seen them stealing away together, and informed Fitzgerald, who set off in pursuit of them. By the time he had reached Kilmallock Abbey, whence he had traced them, the heat of his anger had somewhat abated, and it was in no revengeful mood that he approached the sacred Chapel, where Maurice and Elgiva, standing at the altar, were about to be married.

But again fate intervened. Maurice, at the moment of his father's entry, was imprinting a kiss upon the brow of his beloved, and the sight of this signal favour, bestowed by his son upon his hated enemy's daughter, so maddened him that he ran the unfortunate Elgiva through the body with his sword. Subsequently, everything went wrong with him, so wrong, that, as a result, he died an early death. After his death, so it is said and believed, even his spirit had no rest. And all this mainly through a kiss.

The other story of a fatal kiss in connection with this clan deals with an O'Rourke of the Elizabethan era. At that period the chief of the House of Brefni, or, to give him his Irish title, "The" O'Rourke, lived in his ancestral home, the ancient castle, which, as I have already said, was romantically situated on a precipitous rock overlooking the river near Manor-Hamilton in County Leitrim. Tall and handsome and perfectly proportioned, he presented a very striking figure at social functions; and as, in addition to all this,

he was a brave soldier and beloved leader, he was quite one of the outstanding figures in Ireland at that date.

His friendship with the O'Donnells of the north, however, and his known antipathy to the English, made him an object of constant suspicion and dread to Queen Elizabeth, who was always seeking some device to win over the "troublesome" Irish, as she styled them, to her cause.

Having learned from her spies in Ireland that the O'Rourke was more than ordinarily susceptible to the charms of her sex, she resolved to make use of this information and to turn it to some account. With this object in view, despite the remonstrances of some of her leading statesmen, who were prejudiced against the Irish, the "Wild Irish" as they were termed, and much resented the idea of their being received at the English Court, she gave The O'Rourke a very pressing invitation to come to London, taking good care that her envoys should impress him with the fact that she was generally deemed extremely beautiful.

As Elizabeth had so shrewdly anticipated, the O'Rourke fell into the trap, and on being told that the English queen was a perfect paragon of beauty, and besides, most exquisitely dressed, he at once expressed a desire to see her and accepted her invitation.

His friends did all they could to dissuade him from going to England, but it was useless; his wish to see

this beautiful Queen Elizabeth had grown into a mad craving, a veritable passion.

Before setting out on his journey, however, he invited his friends and vassals to a banquet in the great hall of his castle, and entertained them with all the splendour and magnificence characteristic of those times.*

The voyage to England accomplished without let or hindrance, he now arrived in London, and greatly excited, at the earliest possible moment permitted by etiquette, repaired to the Royal Court.**

Some English historians, in describing the Irish Chieftains and Ladies who visited the Courts of the Tudors and those of even later day sovereigns, would have us believe that these representatives of the Irish nobility were totally uncultured, in fact, mere barbarians with regard to both dress and manners; but that the reverse of this was actually the case may be taken for granted when one considers that Ireland was a seat of culture and learning at a time when the inhabitants of Britain were untutored savages. Hence, viewed in this light, the descriptions of the Irish nobility by the majority of English writers are simply ludicrous examples of the prejudice certain English people have always retained for their Irish neighbours. Though I have no

* O'Rourke's noble feast (in Irish, "Plae Raca na Ruarca"), became the title of a poem by Carolan, an Irish bard. It was versified in English, years later, by Dean Swift.

** The story of his visit to Elizabeth, as I have set forth here, is based on a tradition that was, for a long time, current in County Leitrim, and on Walker's "Irish Bards." As certain historians have discredited it, however, it has become a matter of controversy.

description to hand of the actual garb The O'Rourke wore when he made his appearance at the English Court, I have no doubt but that his costume was in every sense a fitting one and that he conducted himself, in every way, as befitted the occasion. No one attempts to deny one thing, namely, that the elegance and symmetry of his person and noble bearing instantly attracted the attention of the Queen, and that her reception of him was markedly gracious, so gracious, in fact, that it was apparent to all that she had decided, then and there, to make him one of her special favourites.

Though not in the hey-day of her beauty, Elizabeth was still comely, and though no doubt disappointed, after all he had been led to expect, The O'Rourke saw much in her to admire. He would appear to have been particularly taken with her hands, of which she was, quite excusably, extremely vain. They were, undoubtedly, her chief attraction, being white and slender, with tapering fingers and long and perfect almond-shaped nails; and no one, perhaps, let alone The O'Rourke, could help noticing them, because she took care that they should always be very much in evidence. It is said that it was mainly for the purpose of drawing attention to her hands that she would often fondle her favourites publicly and play with their love locks and ringlets.

Whether she thus played with The O'Rourke, history does not say, but from the undisputed fact that he was very favourably looked upon by her, one may conclude

that he came in for a share, and probably no inconsiderable share, of such attentions.

I do not know exactly where he resided on coming to London, but I think it is most likely that quarters were found for him in the neighbourhood of Whitehall. One can picture him in the evening, after he had returned from a day at Court, or in the country, sitting in the dark by his open window, gazing up at the starlit sky, or down into the still street beneath, imagining himself far away in his beloved Leitrim.

While occupied thus one night, he was brought back to realities by someone tapping at his door, and on opening it he was no little surprised to see that his visitor was a woman. The moonlight pouring through an open window on the landing revealed the fact that she was very richly clad, but as she wore a hood drawn low over her face, he could not say whether he knew her or not.

“Fair gentleman,”* she said, in a voice that was strained and unnatural, “forgive me paying you a visit at so late an hour, but my heart smote me when I thought of your loneliness here, without a friend or any relative to cheer you.”

“Who are you, Madam?” The O’Rourke asked. “What is your name?”

“That I cannot tell you,” the lady replied. “It must suffice you to know that I am someone who has seen you

* Or words to this effect. As far as I know, the exact conversation that took place that night between The O’Rourke and his fair visitor has not been recorded.

elsewhere and who takes a peculiar interest in your career."

"Glory be to God, but I am glad to hear that," The O'Rourke exclaimed, "for in this heathenish country, where all the people would seem to be heretics and every Irishman an object of hatred and suspicion, a real friend is, indeed, welcome."

He then showed her into his drawing-room, which, for those times, was quite sumptuously furnished.

The lady's walk and carriage was so stately that O'Rourke's curiosity was greatly piqued. That she was someone of rank, he did not in the least doubt; her speech alone proved that, but who was she? He was going to get a light, but she stopped him.

"Nay," she said, as he moved towards the cupboard where the tinder box was kept, "I like the moonlight best. Sit down beside me and let us talk."

As she spoke, her face seemed to become luminous in the gloom, and O'Rourke caught a glimpse of her eyes, long and dark, fixed on his with an intensity that both thrilled and chilled him. Something of the primitive glamour of the night and stars seemed to adhere to her, and altogether she appeared so strange and unreal, that O'Rourke, who, like most Irishmen was very superstitious, began to wonder if she were human.

As if answering him negatively, whereby his apprehensions were increased out of all proportion, a cold gust of wind suddenly swept through the room, making

the curtains and other hangings in the room rustle, while an owl in the far off trees hooted, and a raven, disengaging itself from the creepers over the window, fluttered away with a melancholy croak.

The O'Rourke at once crossed himself and was about to do so for the second time, when the lady burst out laughing.

"Odd's my life now," she said, "but enough of that. It was but a raven; you couldn't look more scared if the devil himself were looking in at the window. Sit down do, my gentle sir, and talk to me."

The O'Rourke, ashamed now of having, as he thought, made an exhibition of himself, obeyed his mysterious guest and forthwith commenced to converse with her. At her request he described in detail his Irish home, dwelling with perhaps excusable pride on the splendour of his castle and the beauty of his wife and children.

"I have always heard the Irish women are very lovely," the lady said, "but there are some very beautiful English women, too. The queen, for instance."

It was on the tip of The O'Rourke's tongue to say something not altogether complimentary about Elizabeth, but his natural courtesy checked him in time. Knowing that the English sovereign was really esteemed and even venerated by her people, and fearing that if he said anything at all disparaging about her he might hurt his visitor's feelings, he merely remarked :

"Her Majesty's hands are a dream of beauty. I have never seen any to touch them in my country."

"I am supposed to have rather nice hands, too," the lady said mischievously, holding out her hands as she spoke.

O'Rourke regarded them with great interest and noticed that on one of the fingers, only, was a ring, a great ruby of somewhat peculiar shape, that shone and sparkled as it caught the moonlight. The hands themselves were white and slim, the nails rosy and perfect filberts. Very similar, in fact, to the Queen's.

"Well," the lady asked, with a pretty display of nervousness, "what is your verdict, sir?"

"I think they are divine," The O'Rourke replied, lifting them to his lips and kissing them, "absolutely heavenly; Her Majesty's are poor in comparison."

"Oh, fie, fie, sir," the lady laughed. "You Irishmen are all alike, the most preposterous, albeit charming flatterers. I am supposed to have rather small feet, too." She stretched out one little foot as she spoke. It was clad in a very high-heeled satin shoe, upon which sparkled a cluster of diamonds.

Whether accidentally or not, The O'Rourke could not say, but her cloak at that moment fell slightly apart, showing that the lady was somewhat scantily attired, her ruffle low enough to expose her bosom, and her

petticoat high enough to show rather more than mere ankles.

The O'Rourke sprang to his feet and again started crossing himself. The lady rose, too, but this time she did not laugh. With her hands clasped tightly together, her bosom heaving, and her hair, which had become, somewhat mysteriously, loosened, rippling in red gold confusion down her back, she looked pleadingly into his face.

The O'Rourke turned away his head and prayed to all the Saints he could think of to keep him from evil. The lady advanced a little nearer and stretching out her hands laid them very gently on his shoulders. Had his soul been imperilled a thousand times over, The O'Rourke could no longer have held out. To one of his imagination and impressionability, the touch of those delicate fingers was irresistible. He looked round and down, and perceiving a mouth with pearly teeth and ripe red lips raised to his, he kissed it not once, but many times, with all the fire and passion of a strong and vigorous manhood.

At dawn the lady left him with a promise to return again at the same hour the following night, conditionally, however, that he kept her visit a profound secret and made no attempt whatsoever to discover her identity.

The O'Rourke promised. The following night and for several succeeding nights she came, but invariably she wore her hood drawn low over her face, so that he could

never see the upper part of it properly. Also, she invariably went away at dawn, leaving him with an insatiable craving to see her again.

Since he had known this lady, The O'Rourke had received no invitation to Court, and he was beginning to fear that the Queen had heard about his nocturnal visitor and was displeased with him in consequence, when he got a letter, bidding him attend a Royal levée the following morning.

That evening the mysterious lady was more than usually demonstrative and, apparently jealous, expressed the utmost apprehension and concern when he told her of his coming visit to the Royal Court.

"Odd's life!" she said, twisting his ringlets round her fingers, "you will end by falling in love with the Queen; my hands, compared with hers, will be as nought, and after to-morrow you will not even deign to look at them."

It was again on the tip of The O'Rourke's tongue to say something uncomplimentary about the Queen, but again, and for the same reason, he checked himself.

"Queen Elizabeth is certainly very striking," he said, "she has a fine figure and presence, and her clothes and jewels are magnificent."

"Is that all?" the lady said, rather coldly. "She is generally supposed to have very good eyes, a well-shaped nose and a very attractive mouth."

"It is only your mouth, dear love, that attracts me,"

The O'Rourke replied, gallantly. "Since I first kissed yours, I can think of no other, not even Queen Elizabeth's."

"Ah, well," the lady sighed, "maybe I shall hear a different tale to-morrow night," and she pinched his ear sharply as she spoke.

The following morning The O'Rourke presented himself at Court and was duly ushered into the Royal Presence. The Queen, who was giving audience to certain Ambassadors, was dressed with even more than her customary splendour, and the sunlight pouring on her through the great windows of the Palace made the jewels that covered her from head to foot gleam and glitter in a manner that was positively trying to the eyes.

The O'Rourke was absolutely dazzled, he had never seen such a profusion of wealth on any one person before. The spectacle fascinated him, and as she leaned slightly forward on her throne and made some smiling remark to one of her Ministers, she looked quite winsome and pretty. The next moment, however, something displeasing her, she frowned, her lips at the same time tightening and curving downwards, and The O'Rourke, thinking her then positively ugly, shuddered at the prospect of being once again obliged to pay her homage.

The Ambassadors and various strangers who had been presented by them having retired, Elizabeth, after saying a few words to some of her favourite courtiers,

dismissed them and sent word to the O'Rourke that she wished to speak to him.

By this time the frown had completely vanished from her face, and when he approached her and knelt at her feet, she smiled, and he again thought her charming.

"You find me then passing fair for a Queen," she said in a low voice, noting the look of intense admiration in his eyes, and The O'Rourke, with all the fervour and intensity of his race at once replied that he wished himself dead if he didn't say truly that he had never seen, that he never could see, a Queen or subject to equal her.

"Oh, oh! my friend," she laughed, "have a care. Even before you flatter, it is best to think once if not twice."

The O'Rourke was about to reply, when his glance fell upon a ring the Queen was wearing, a gold ring set with one large ruby of a somewhat peculiar shape. He looked at the hand it adorned. It was a lovely hand, with long, slender fingers and beautiful, almond-shaped nails; and without the shadow of a doubt it belonged to his nocturnal visitor. The mysterious lady, then, was none other than Elizabeth herself, and as the truth flashed home to him, The O'Rourke, utterly forgetful of his present surroundings, and only remembering the favours that Elizabeth at a different time and in a different place had bestowed upon him, raised the Royal hand to his lips and kissed it passionately. In fact, he held it, clasped

in his, so long, and kissed it so many times, that some of the Courtiers and ladies standing by nudged one another and smiled.

“Have done, Sir,” the Queen remarked haughtily. “Your Irish customs are not understood at my Court. Were you not a stranger in this country and untutored in our English etiquette and manners, I should deal with you severely. It is to these circumstances that you owe my clemency and your pardon. Arise.”

In no little confusion of mind, though outwardly calm, The O'Rourke obeyed the Queen's command, and as he rose from the ground, he glanced at her mouth, at the bright, red lips, just sufficiently parted to enable him to see two rows of very even, pearly teeth. It was not a strictly beautiful mouth, the lips were a trifle thin, but it was alluring, extraordinarily alluring for all that, and so vividly did it recall the moments of tense and reciprocated passion associated with his nocturnal visitor, that involuntarily and before he could realize what he was doing, he looked into the Queen's eyes and smiled a smile that was unmistakably one of pleased and happy recognition. Thereat the Queen's face instantly hardened, and with an expression overspreading her features that struck cold terror into the heart of The O'Rourke, she dismissed him.

That night he awaited his visitor in vain. She neither came to him that night, nor any succeeding night, and when, a few days later, his faithful and trusted Irish servant went into his bedchamber in the morning, he

found him dead. Apparently he had been murdered,* stabbed to the heart, while asleep ; but by whom no one could, or maybe would, say.

* This, according to Walker's " Irish Bards." Some writers say he was executed for giving shelter to some homeless, shipwrecked Spaniards. His son, to avenge his death, subsequently joined the O'Neills and O'Donnells in their campaign against the English.

CHAPTER III

A FIENDISH MOTHER

IN the reign of George II. there lived at Oulton House,* Suffolk, a certain Squire Hobart. He was a keen, all round sportsman, and an indefatigable follower of the hounds, in fact a genial, jolly individual, at times a trifle hasty perhaps, but very generous and hospitable, and on that account extremely popular with his neighbours and tenants.

At the time this story opens he and his lady were entertaining a house party at Oulton and among the guests was a very handsome yet somewhat sinister-looking young Captain, Leroux, by name, who had the reputation—quite unknown to his kind-hearted host—of being very much of a lady's man and a bit of a duellist.

Had the Squire been more observant, or had he possessed a normally suspicious nature, instead of an abnormally simple one, he would no doubt have noticed, what all his guests and servants had noticed, namely,

* In existence some years ago (and perhaps still is in existence) but was converted into a school.

As neither Mr. Ingram (*vide* "Haunted Homes and Family Traditions of Great Britain, p. 186), nor Mr. T. F. Thiselton Dyer (see "Strange Pages," p. 302), nor any of the other authorities to whom I have referred give the names of any of the people connected with the events I am about to narrate, I have adapted fictitious ones. As Oulton House, however, was built by a Hobart, it is not unlikely the Squire in this story actually bore that name.

that from the moment his wife and Captain Leroux met, their behaviour towards each other was most unusual.

For example, on the very night of his arrival, Captain Leroux, sitting next to his pretty hostess at dinner, gazed admiringly into her blue eyes, and whenever he thought no one was looking, touched her long, tapering fingers with his own short, muscular ones, and paid her countless other surreptitious attentions. Then, apparently taking encouragement from the fact that she did not repulse him, but appeared to be quite game for a more advanced flirtation, he persevered, and by the time dinner was over and the ladies had repaired to the drawing-room, he had so far progressed in his amorous designs that he no longer had any doubt as to the issue.

Madame Hobart would seem to have been a very comely and fascinating woman. Fair, with china blue eyes and a well-moulded, healthy mouth, she possessed in addition to these attractions a good figure and lovely hands and feet. Being many years her husband's junior, she may have found him boring, to such an extent that she longed for the society of younger and gayer men.

At all events she apparently met the advances of the sinister Leroux more than half way, and it was not long before their flirtation ended and intimacy began.

As already stated, her simple-minded husband neither saw nor suspected anything, and it was only by accident that he eventually discovered the truth.

He had set off one morning, as usual, with the hounds, when he suddenly remembered he had left an important

letter unanswered, and in order to repair the omission, he turned his horse's head and returned home. As he wended his way across the hall towards his study he caught the sound of voices, a man's and a woman's, proceeding from the drawing-room, the door of which was slightly open. He could not quite catch what was being said, but he recognized the woman's voice; it was undoubtedly his wife's, and curious to know who the man was and what the conversation could be about, he quietly approached the door of the room and peeped in. His wife and her companion, whom he now saw to be Leroux, were standing on the rug in front of the ingle, his wife with Leroux's arm round her waist, and they were looking at one another in an unmistakably amorous fashion. Then, suddenly, Leroux drew her fiercely towards him and their lips met in a prolonged and passionate kiss.

Overwhelmed by this shock, Hobart was rendered dazed and powerless, and he had to lean against the doorway to prevent himself from falling. Directly his faculties returned, however, he sprang into the room with a shout of fury, and whipping out his sword, rushed on Leroux. The Captain immediately drew his rapier, and a desperate fight ensued. In all probability, the Captain was the more skilful swordsman of the two, but the fight might have lasted longer, had not Mrs. Hobart interfered and impeded her husband's movements. Not only did she egg her lover on, expressing her fondest hope that he would soon kill his opponent, but she got

behind her husband and catching him by the arms, tried to trip him. Indeed, he was in the act of wrenching himself free from her hold, when Leroux, seeing him thus hampered, took advantage of it and ran him through.*

"The old fool isn't dead," Madame Hobart cried, spurning her husband's writhing body with her dainty foot, "run him through again."

Leroux did so ; and a moment later, Hobart lay stiff and still.

A dead silence followed, interrupted only by the cawing of some distant crows. Leroux was the first to speak.

"You will swear it was a fair fight, won't you ?" he said at length, his hands shaking a little as he wiped his weapon and then sheathed it.

"Of course," Madame Hobart replied, "but we have nothing to fear, for there is no one in the house but ourselves. Evangeline (Evangeline was their only child and the Squire had doted on her) and the servants have gone to the village fair. It really seems providential that I should have given them all leave to go to it."

"You are right," the Captain said, with a grim smile. "Providence is impartial. It is not invariably on the side of virtue. But we must go before they return ; they may suspect us, and in that case we should fare badly. Your crude, not to say rude, Hobart, was so devilish popular."

"I can't think why," Madame Hobart responded.

* Various accounts are given of the fracas but this one seems to me to be the most probable.

"I never could stand him. If he hadn't had money, I should never have dreamed of marrying him."

"And yet you will leave all this wealth and fly with me," Leroux said, clasping her in his arms and kissing her. "You little witch, what a magic power is love."

Without staying to do more than collect and thrust into a valise all the jewels and other valuables they could find easily, they took their departure. Of course, inquiries were made respecting the manner of Hobart's death, and many people questioned the truth of the Captain's and Madame Hobart's statement that he fell in fair fight, but as there had been no witness of the duel, and duels were legal and common enough in those days, there was no alternative but to let the matter drop.

Later, Leroux and Madame Hobart took up their abode in Namur; and were kept in touch, probably through the medium of paid spies, with all that went on at Oulton.

The Squire had left his estate to his only child, Evangeline, who, in course of time, developed into a very charming young woman, with all the attractions of her mother and none of her vices. It was therefore small wonder that all the youths in the neighbourhood were vying with each other for her favour, and it was some time before she could decide upon whom to bestow it.

Eventually her choice fell upon William Richards, the son of a well-to-do farmer in the neighbourhood. Apparently, there was no obstacle to the match, and the

course of true love ran quite smoothly until the very eve of the wedding, when a terrible tragedy occurred.

It was fine weather, and Evangeline and her fiancé were sitting by the open window of the drawing-room at Oulton House discussing the coming event and building all kinds of delightful castles in the air. A great, silvery moon shone serenely in a sky of cloudless blue. The leaves of the great oaks and elms, facing the window where the lovers sat, rustled softly, while from afar off came the occasional baying of hounds and the croaking and hooting of night birds. Otherwise, all was very hushed, and the voices of the lovers, though by no means high pitched, sounded almost loud in the general silence.

Presently, Evangeline, who was leaning out of the window, with her eyes fixed on the stars, remarked :

“Do you hear that ? Wheels on the high road and coming in this direction. It surely can’t be anyone for us at this hour.”

The wheels drew rapidly nearer and presently stopped at the entrance to the carriage drive. There was a screaming of rusty iron as the gates flew back on their hinges, and then a crunching of gravel as the vehicle came dashing along at a great pace to the house.

Evangeline and Richards, rising hurriedly from their seats, now saw, to their amazement, a great, hearse-like coach, stopping at the front door. It was black as ebony and drawn by four huge black horses, whilst the coachman and footman were clad in black livery. Four men, also in black, and mounted on black horses, accompanied

the coach, two on either side of it, and one of them, dismounting, approached the front door and knocked.

“What horrible-looking men,” Evangeline exclaimed, clinging to her lover. “Who can they be and what can they want?”

Accompanied by Richards, she went into the hall, where the servants, looking scared to death, were standing, all huddled together.

The knocking, which had gone on without ceasing, now got louder and louder, until with a tremendous crash, the door flew open and into the hall rushed the four men with drawn swords. Brushing past the servants, who, paralysed with fear, were rooted to the ground, they seized Evangeline and were about to drag her away, when William Richards intervened.

A desperate struggle ensued, but the fight being too unequal, it did not last long. By the exercise of an almost superhuman agility and courage, Richards succeeded in dispatching one of his assailants, but the others, closing in on him, beat down his guard and ran him through.

On seeing him fall, Evangeline broke away from the ruffian who was holding her and flung herself down by his side. He was still alive, but died almost at once in her arms, her lips pressed frantically to his.

Dazed and almost demented, she was then taken to the coach and thrust inside it. Still in a semi-conscious state, she was driven to the sea coast and placed on board a small vessel, which after a stormy voyage,

landed her in France. She was then taken by coach to Namur and handed over to her mother and Captain Leroux, who made no secret of their motive in abducting her.

“You are here,” Mrs. Hobart remarked to her on the night of her arrival in Namur, “to marry the man that I have chosen for you. You will be introduced to him to-morrow.”

“My fiancé is dead, I shall never marry,” Evangeline gasped, almost too exhausted to speak.

“We will see about that,” her mother replied. “M. Guilgaut will be here at eleven; take care that you are dressed and ready to receive him.”

Evangeline, unable to utter a sound, sank back in her chair in a faint.

A word now with regard to M. Guilgaut. His parentage, if not an actual mystery, was never known for certain. Madame Hobart gave out that he was her nephew, but not a few people believed him to be the outcome of her guilty intercourse with Leroux. For some inexplicable reason this unnatural wife and mother had always hated Evangeline, and she now determined to bend her to her will, and by making her marry Guilgaut, get possession of her money.

The following morning M. Guilgaut arrived, and Evangeline, made to array herself in a new and costly dress (bought in Paris for the occasion by Madame Hobart) and to don much jewellery, was literally forced by blows and pinches into his presence.

It is only fair to Captain Leroux to say that, although he tried to persuade Evangeline to comply with her mother's wishes with regard to Guilgaut, he never resorted to violence ; nor was he a party to it. Guilgaut, a mere youth, slight and effeminate-looking, spent most of his time dressing, posing in front of a mirror and parading the streets. He was, in fact, a fop, or what was then known as a macaroni, and like the majority of this species, he was not over-burdened with brains.

Evangeline was about his own age, and the moment he saw her he exclaimed :

“ *Mon Dieu, c'est merveilleuse.* I did not expect to see anyone so beautiful. There's no one in this town to compare with you. Forgive me for being so outspoken, but 'pon my honour, there's some excuse, for I'm quite dazzled—overcome, in fact.” And then, turning to look at himself in a mirror, lest in his unwonted outburst of enthusiasm something might have become disarranged, he patted his curls.

In her mother's presence, Evangeline dared not be other than civil to him, and she received his compliments and the various advances he made to her, with the best grace she could assume. At the same time she was firmly resolved to die sooner than marry him.

But it was not only M. Guilgaut with whom she had to contend. Leroux also paid her compliments and marked attention whenever he found her alone. Hence, it chanced that one day, seeing her lying on the divan in the drawing-room, asleep, Leroux, finding himself the

only other occupant of the room and knowing that Madame Hobart had gone out and would not be home for some time, stole up to the sleeping beauty and bending over her, kissed her gently on the lips. Evidently worn out by all she had gone through and probably harassed by the thought of what the future held in store for her, Evangeline did not wake at once, and Leroux was about to kiss her again, when a slight noise in the hall outside arrested his attention. He instantly searched the house, thoroughly as he thought, and as far as he could see, no one was there. Consequently, thinking that he had merely fancied he heard someone, he returned to the drawing-room, but only to find, to his great disappointment, that Evangeline had gone.

Now the noise Leroux had heard in the hall was not due to his imagination, nor was it the outcome, though it well might have been, of a guilty conscience. Madame Hobart, returning home sooner than she had intended, had been about to enter the drawing-room, the door of which was half open, when she saw something in the mirror over the mantelshelf that made her pause. It was the reflection of Leroux in the act of kissing Evangeline. In an instant all her pre-arranged plans, the plans she had so carefully prepared, were swept aside. She was mad with jealousy and resolved now that Evangeline, instead of being married, should die. It did not take Madame Hobart long to carry out her diabolical resolution. An adept, possibly, in the art of poisoning, she chose that method of dispatch in order to avoid detec-

tion. Anyhow, before the day was out, Evangeline lay dead, and her death, ostensibly attributable to natural causes, though in reality to poison, was, strangely enough, no less than the death of her father, directly due to a kiss.*

* According to Mr. Dyer (*vide* "Strange Pages from Family Papers"), the house in which this crime was enacted, as well as Oulton House, were subsequently, and for many years, haunted by a phantasm, popularly supposed to be that of Madame Hobart.

CHAPTER IV

THE MARQUISE DE BRINVILLIERS

ON the 22nd of July, 1630, the wife of M. Dreux d'Aubray, a French magistrate of good family and reputation, gave birth to a child, destined to figure in due course, as, possibly, the most infamous murderess of all time.

Christened Marie Madeline, the child grew into a girl of quite extraordinary beauty. According to some writers, she had hair the colour of ripe corn, while others affirm it was auburn. All agree, however, that it was worn in long curls that fell in profusion over her neck and shoulders. Her eyes were large and blue, china-blue, sometimes soft and wistful, but more often hard and of a strange brilliancy, whilst her eyelashes were black and she had very dark eyebrows. Though small and neat, her features could not be described as classical; they were pretty and piquant rather than handsome; and therein, in the opinion of many, especially of many men, lay their singular charm. If one had to find a fault with her face, one would say, perhaps, it lay in her lips, which were a trifle too thin; but they were exquisitely moulded, and her teeth were perfect. Though rather

under the average height for a woman, she was admirably proportioned, and like so many Frenchwomen, particularly Frenchwomen of that period, she had very lovely hands, small and slim, with long, tapering fingers and the most beautiful almond-shaped nails, of which she was, quite excusably, vain.

As might have been expected, she had hosts of admirers, but she appears to have treated them all with apparent indifference, till she was finally introduced to Antoine Gobelin, the Marquis de Brinvilliers. Though there was a good deal of disparity in their ages, Marie, apparently, if she did not actually love him, liked him, and the marriage certainly does not appear to have been in any way distasteful to her. Indeed, for some years they lived, so far as outsiders could judge, quite happily together, attached to each other and obviously much attached to their children.

Then there occurred an event, which seems to have wholly altered the even tenor of their lives. It was this. In 1659, eight years after their marriage, they met, quite by chance, the Chevalier Gaudin de Sainte-Croix, a captain in a crack cavalry regiment, who had distinguished himself on active service on more than one occasion. No one knew anything of his antecedents, but it was generally believed that he came of poor and humble parentage, and that he had risen to his present position entirely through his valour and striking personality.

He was about thirty-five years of age, tall and good-

looking, and always most immaculately dressed, and he had easy manners and that indefinable something which invariably commends itself to women and instantly wins their confidence.

Now there used to be at this time in Paris, either in or near the Rue Veille-du-Temple, certain Turkish Baths, where fashion and beauty foregathered in the afternoon and evening, to drink wine, play cards and discuss the latest scandals. And more than that, the proprietor of the establishment, a thorough rascal, catered especially for lovers, and reserved for their use, suites of rooms where they could be alone together, with little or no fear of interruption.

Among the patrons of the place was no less a personage than the King, Louis XIV., and it was quite a usual thing for members of his Court to hire salons at these Turkish Baths for balls and banquets. It was at one of the balls given at this place that the first meeting between Sainte-Croix and the de Brinvilliers is believed to have taken place.

Sainte-Croix's temperament was one that is not at all uncommon in France. Impulsive and romantically inclined, he was ever falling in love with women, and as soon as he saw Madame de Brinvilliers he was infatuated.

"Never have I beheld such beauty," he said to himself, and he forthwith resolved to make her either his wife or mistress. With the cunning, however, that was one of his chief characteristics, he tried to mask his feelings and to ingratiate himself in the good books of Marie's

husband. In this latter endeavour at all events he succeeded.

De Brinvilliers at once took a fancy to him and invited him to come to his house. Needless to say, Sainte-Croix, with a show of mere formality that he was far from feeling, accepted the invitation, and from that time onwards was a constant visitor at the de Brinvilliers.

A week or so after his visits had commenced, Marie de Brinvilliers did one of the most extraordinary things in her very extraordinary life. She sought her husband one morning, and finding him in his dressing-room preparing for a ride, said :

“ Antoine, may I beg of you not to invite Captain Croix to this house any more ? ”

“ Why ever not ? ” the Marquis exclaimed, eyeing her in astonishment, “ what has the poor chevalier done to incur your displeasure ? ”

“ Nothing,” Marie rejoined, lowering her eyes and at the same time slightly colouring.

“ What is it then ? ” de Brinvilliers said, a trifle, perhaps, impatiently.

“ He is fond of women,” Marie replied, her delicate finger-tips playing nervously with the dainty lace falling from the neck of her dress, “ and—I fear him.”

“ Well, I don’t, sweetheart,” the Marquis laughed, putting his arm round her waist and drawing her to him, “ We have been married long enough for me to know that I can trust you. Sainte-Croix may seem, perhaps, a

trifle familiar in his mode of addressing you, but it is only his way. So many soliders are like that—he means nothing.”

“Maybe,” Marie said, slowly, “still, I would rather he stayed away.”

The Marquis made no reply, but kissed her fondly, and having now finished dressing, gaily mounted his horse and rode off in the direction of Versailles.

A few days later the Marquis was again getting ready for his morning ride, when Marie once more entered the room.

“Well, sweetheart,” he laughed, “have you come to scold me for allowing Sainte-Croix to dine with us again last night?”

“No,” the Marquise replied, toying with her bracelets.

“What is it then, Marie?” de Brinvilliers inquired, looking at himself in the mirror and arranging his cravat.

“I want you to invite him to stay with us for a while, dear one,” Marie replied. “He is leaving his lodgings in the Rue du Chant de l’Alouette and is at present without quarters.”

“So you want my house turned into an hotel for his benefit,” the Marquis laughed. “I thought you didn’t like him.”

“I never said so,” Marie responded, handing her husband his much-perfumed handkerchief as she spoke. “May I write to him on your behalf?”

“Why, certainly,” the Marquis said, “I don’t want

him here eternally, but so long as he only stays for a few weeks, I have no objection whatever. There's no fear of your falling in love with him, sweetheart, eh ? ”

“ Don't be so absurd,” Marie replied, a faint blush pinkening her otherwise rather pale cheeks. “ I care for no one but you, Antoine, and never shall.”

“ I'm not so sure,” de Brinvilliers remarked lightly. “ You're still very young and beautiful, you know, while I'm getting old and ugly. Anyhow, I think I can trust you with Sainte-Croix, so ask him.”

Had he seen the look in Marie's eyes as he said these words, he would not have felt quite so sure, perhaps, but he was far too intent on examining himself in the mirror to notice her at all closely.

With a parting careless kiss he left her, and Marie retired to her boudoir to write to Sainte-Croix, and ask him to stay with them until he had found fresh quarters.

After that, the days slipped by peacefully enough for the Marquis's household, until one evening de Brinvilliers received an unexpected visit from his father-in-law, M. Dreux d'Aubray.

The latter appeared much agitated.

“ Do you know what brings me here at such a late hour, Antoine ? ” he said, as soon as he found himself alone with the Marquis.

“ Nothing very serious, I hope,” de Brinvilliers exclaimed, stifling a yawn and cursing his bad luck at not being able to retire to bed just when he was beginning to feel downright sleepy.

"It is serious," M. d'Aubray said, "serious for both you and me."

"Oh!" the Marquis ejaculated, trying to stifle another yawn and only half succeeding. "What has happened? The horse I commissioned M. Gourbet to buy for me has not shown any defects, I hope."

"No," M. d'Aubray replied sternly. "What I have to tell you does not concern your horse, it concerns your wife, my daughter. She is faithless to you."

"Marie faithless! I can't believe it!" de Brinvilliers ejaculated, beginning at last to be aroused. "What do you mean, sir. Explain yourself."

"That is just what I intend doing," M. d'Aubray said calmly. "Listen. I arrived in Paris by the stage coach yesterday afternoon at three o'clock. I proceeded to my hotel in the Rue Croulebarbe, received a visit from M. Cambrenei there, dined, and at exactly a quarter past eight set out with the intention of coming here direct. On the way, however, one of the Baron Savari's servants overtook me with a note from his master, asking me to come to his house at once, as he wanted to see me on business. I was disappointed, but, of course, I had to go. My new route led me past the Church of Saint Germain l'Auxerrois, and just as I reached it, I heard voices proceeding from the garden* almost immediately opposite it. Something familiar in one of them made me pause, and forgetting I was playing the part of an eaves-dropper, I listened.

* Long since built over.

“ ‘I wish you would give up gambling, Gaudin,’ I heard a woman say. ‘Within the last few days you have lost over a thousand pistoles, more than either of us can afford.’

“ ‘I’m sorry, dear heart,’ a man’s voice replied. ‘I’ll try and reform for your sweet sake.’

“ ‘Not for mine only,’ the woman said, pleadingly, ‘but for our child’s as well. We must have him properly cared for and educated.’

“ ‘Yes, yes,’ the man responded, eagerly. ‘We must, we will. The Marquis has no suspicions?’

“ ‘None,’ the woman replied, ‘he believes in me wholly. It is only my father I fear.’

“I had suspected it was Marie who was speaking all the while, but now, to make sure, I made an aperture in the bushes and peered through. The garden was flooded with moonlight, and on a bench facing me, not many yards away, sat a man and woman. The woman was Marie, your wife, my daughter, the man was the Chevalier Sainte-Croix.”

“You are jesting,” the Marquis ejaculated, in a hoarse voice. “I can’t, I won’t believe it.”

“Very well then,” M. Dreux d’Aubray said, in a calm voice. “Come with me to-night to the same spot and see with your own eyes what I have seen. They have arranged to meet there again at midnight, when, according to Marie, you will be safe in bed, sound asleep. You agree?”

“Yes,” the Marquis said, slowly and with evident

reluctance, "although I hate above all things playing spy,—especially when it's my wife I am spying on."

It was a beautiful night, a great white moon hung directly overhead, rendering every object clearly visible ; and after a brisk walk M. Dreux d'Aubray and the Marquis arrived at the Church of Saint Germain l'Auxerrois, at ten minutes to twelve.

The bushes bordering the garden grounds offered capital cover—and the two men hastily concealed themselves in a clump of laurels.

Hardly had they done so, when the sound of light, hurrying footsteps on the paved roadway, the clear tap, tap of someone in high-heeled shoes hastening along, fell upon their ears, and they saw a woman, clad from head to foot in a dark cloak, advancing towards the garden at a pace not far short of a run.

"It's Marie," M. d'Aubray whispered fiercely, gripping his companion by the arm. "Now, was I right, or was I not ?"

"It certainly is Marie," de Brinvilliers said, calmly, "but she is alone."

"So far, yes," M. d'Aubray replied, "but wait."

The bushes where the watchers were concealed formed the boundary of a garden, that was the common property of people living in the adjacent street, and it was more or less like all such gardens found at that period and still later periods in most of the big French towns. It was intersected in all directions by narrow paths, winding round grass plots and flower beds, and here and

there, nestling among its many trees, might be seen kiosks and creeper-clad boweries. It was to one of the last-named, facing the watchers, that Marie de Brinvilliers wended her way, pausing every now and then to look behind her and cast anxious glances around. She was obviously expecting to see someone, and she had not long to wait, for she had hardly arrived at the bowery before a tall man, wearing a wide-brimmed hat with a long, sweeping plume, and a voluminous cloak, coming from an opposite direction, hastily crossed a wide plot of shadow-laden grass and joined her.

M. d'Aubray had his hand on his son-in-law's arm and his grip tightened.

"Gaudin," the watchers heard Marie exclaim, in somewhat reproachful tones, "you are not punctual to-night. Why is that?"

"I could not help it, Marie," Sainte-Croix—for it was he—replied. "I was trying a new experiment in toxicology and I confess it so interested me that I quite forgot the time."

They were confronting one another now, and the moonlight falling directly on them, threw their figures into strong relief. They made a striking contrast, he so tall, and dark, and sinewy, and she so small, dazzlingly fair, and so very fragile. In their faces, the faces of both of them, there was more than a mere suggestion of the cloisters, the gloom and hidden mystery of convent and monastery. It was as if a moustached and military Dante stood face to face with a fashionable seventeenth-

century Beatrice. And, yet, despite all this glamour, all this appearance of beauty and romance, there was a something, also, about them, a something maybe in their general appearance, maybe in the atmosphere they seemed to bring with them, maybe in both, that was unpleasantly arrestive and distinctly sinister. I will liken them again to Dante and Beatrice, but this time to a Dante and Beatrice that had lingered too long in the Inferno.

The two men in hiding were fascinated. They watched them in breathless silence ; watched them as they moved their faces nearer to one another, watched them as their lips met in a long and unquestionably passionate kiss. Until this point was reached, the Marquis, spellbound, had kept absolutely still ; now he suddenly made a movement and his companion, fearing they would be discovered, signalled to him to be quiet and accompany him home.

“ Well,” he exclaimed, as soon as they were out of ear-shot, “ have you seen enough now to convince you that I have told no untruth with regard to your wife and Sainte-Croix ? ”

“ Yes,” the Marquis said bitterly. “ I have seen enough and more than enough. My faith in everything is shattered. I no longer believe in a God, only in a Devil.”

“ Then you have no objection to my getting a *lettre de cachet* to commit Sainte-Croix to the Bastille ? ” M. d’Aubray remarked. “ The honour of my house and

your honour as a husband demand that I should do so."

"Do so, by all means," de Brinvilliers said, sadly. "It may, as you say, avenge my honour, but it cannot bring Marie back to me."

Shortly after this they parted. M. d'Aubray hurrying off, to make plans for the arrest of Sainte-Croix on the morrow, the Marquis, with no thought of sleep, to sit by his open window brooding, till the dawn had long risen and the early morning sunbeams had chased away the last of the night's dark shadows.

The following day, at noon, Captain Gaudin de Sainte-Croix was arrested, when quitting the gaming table, and under a strong escort conducted to the Bastille. Though he was not told on what charge he was brought there, he of course guessed, and he wondered, as he accompanied the jailers down the narrow, winding stone staircase leading to his cell, which seemed to be situated in the very bowels of the earth, if he should ever again enjoy freedom.

The dungeon in which he found himself was so bathed in gloom that he could not, on entering it, determine its dimensions. Indeed, he was far too dispirited even to make the attempt. In one corner of it he espied a heap of straw, presumably his bed, and though he realized the probability of its being full of vermin, he threw himself on it, and wept passionately. Tears are often one of nature's safety valves. They save the heart from bursting, and the brain from giving way. In the case of Sainte-

Croix, there was no fear, perhaps, of either of these catastrophes, but his fit of weeping at length over, he certainly felt better, and better still after he had drunk a little of the brandy in the flask which the jailer, for some reason or another, had allowed him to retain.

He got up and was about to make an investigation of the dungeon, when his attention was arrested by some object that gleamed bright in the moonlight. He at once approached it and discovered it was a piece of broken mirror nailed against the wall, possibly used by the last inmate of the cell when shaving.

Even a few hours in the Bastille had wrought a change in Sainte-Croix. He looked years older, in fact so worn and haggard that he hardly recognized the image as his own, and he was still staring at it in consternation, when he was startled to see the reflection of another face peering over his shoulder.

It was that of a man with long, matted hair, and unkempt beard. He was so emaciated that his cheek bones seemed on the verge of bursting through his flesh, while the waxy pallor of his skin resembled that of a corpse. Indeed, the only apparent sign of life in the face were the eyes, which, deep-set and sunken, glowed with a strange phosphorescent light.

Believing the face to be no earthly one, but to belong to some dreadful apparition, Sainte-Croix was terrified. His knees shook, while his blood literally ran cold. Then, suddenly, a hand touched him on the shoulder and he fainted.

When he came to, he found himself lying on his bed of straw.

"You are better now," a voice from close beside him said. "No wonder I frightened you, for after being shut up in this foul atmosphere for years and fed only on bread and water, I must appear far more like the dead than the living. I am Exali."

"Not the Exali, the poisoner," Sainte-Croix ejaculated in horror.

"Yes," his companion said, calmly. "The Exali. But far from regarding me with aversion, you should welcome me with joy, for I may prove your benefactor, just as I have proved the benefactor of hundreds of other people."

A week later they were firm friends. Exali bore a terrible reputation. For years he had studied toxicology in Florence and he was believed to know more about poisons than any living being. Indeed, people, especially women who wanted to get rid of their husbands and rivals, came to consult him from all parts of the world, and he was credited with being either directly or indirectly responsible not for some scores of deaths, but hundreds. He constantly boasted he knew the secrets of the Medicis and Borgias and that he had a greater knowledge of his art than either René or La Tophana, two of the cleverest and most infamous professional poisoners ever known. A man with a wonderful mind, a thinker, philosopher, and seeker after wisdom on all subjects, Exali soon exercised a powerful influence over

Sainte-Croix, who came to regard him with the utmost admiration and awe.

Allowed, probably through bribery, for the officials of the Bastille, from the Governor to turnkeys would seem to have been hopelessly corrupt, to continue his study of poisons in prison, Exali found in Sainte-Croix a very keen and apt pupil, and they were not infrequently joined in their work by another notorious poisoner called Christopher Glaser, a German, who had started life as an apothecary, but was now, like them, under an indefinite term of imprisonment.

From one or other of these men Sainte-Croix obtained various poisons, some say sublimate, others, calcined and prepared vitriol ; and others, again, simply arsenic. In all probability he obtained all three and others besides. His object was to send them secretly to Marie de Brinvilliers, with recommendations to use them on the individual who was responsible for his imprisonment.

" I shall never be free," he wrote, or words to that effect, " so long as he lives, and it is in your power now to have me set at liberty."

He must have felt very sure of Marie before he approached the subject to her ; it is quite possible, indeed, that they had discussed the project of removing both the Marquis and M. d'Aubray out of their path before Sainte-Croix was arrested.* At any rate he had no hesitation in sending her the poisons, and he would seem to have been quite confident that she would fall in with his

* Some writers go so far as to say that Marie had repeatedly tried to poison her husband.

proposal. In this he was not disappointed. Before, however, using them on her husband and father, Marie decided to test their efficacy on people in a humbler walk of life.

With this end in view she visited hospitals where the women and children of the poorer classes were confined. She never went empty handed but always took cakes, and fruit, and wine, which she gave to the patients, always accompanying her presents with a kiss. No sooner, however, were her gifts consumed, than those who had partaken of them became suddenly ill, dying shortly afterwards in the greatest agony.

Marie invariably stayed with them to the last, stroking their foreheads with her cool white fingers and talking soothingly to them. In this way she evaded suspicion, not a soul in the hospital associating her at the time in any way with the deaths of her victims. When she was tired of experimenting on these poor people, she turned her attention to her own servants, who, even if they had suspected her, would not have dared refuse anything she offered them. To a boy who had offended her she gave gooseberry jam, poisoned of course, and when he showed some reluctance to eat it, she slashed him across the back with a cane, declaring she would beat him to death, unless he consumed it at once. Believing she would carry out her threat, he complied, and soon afterwards perished in the most dreadful agony, the Marquise standing by his side and watching him, with an expression of the most intense interest in her beautiful blue eyes.

Having at length satisfied herself that the poisons Sainte-Croix had sent her worked efficiently, Marie now determined to try them on those she really wished out of the way.

She selected her husband first.

Not a word had passed between them relative to the disappearance of Sainte-Croix, and Marie simulated such utter unconcern regarding the Captain, that de Brinvilliers would have found it difficult to believe in her guilt, had he not actually witnessed her meeting with her lover that night in the gardens. When he told M. d'Aubray that Marie still appeared to love him, the former at once said :

"I fear you are mistaken. Marie was always deceitful, even as a little child. When she smiles and looks her sweetest it is then you have to beware of her most. What heart she has, my good friend, belongs to Sainte-Croix, not to you."

De Brinvilliers was not wholly convinced, however ; he could not believe Marie could smile so amicably at him and look so affectionate, if she did not care for him at all. He did not realize that some women are born actresses and possess a natural histrionic ability far in excess of that of any man.

Thanks to the devilish ingenuity of nature, there is something in the eyes of snakes and all beasts of prey that fascinates ; it is so with many human homicidal criminals. Marie de Brinvilliers came within that category and knew it. She had only to look at her eyes in a mirror to

realize their beauty, and she knew that directly men stared straight into their azure depths they were completely at her mercy. Her eyes could hold them literally spellbound, to do and think all she required of them.

She determined to experiment with them now on her husband. Accordingly she perched herself on the arm of his chair one night after supper and putting her dainty, jewelled fingers under his chin, told him playfully to look at her. The Marquis of course obeyed—his supper, Marie had arranged he should have an unusually good one, made him feel exceptionally amiable—and glancing up, encountered Marie's eyes smiling down at him. From that moment he was lost. So hopelessly fascinated was he by those lovely blue depths that seemed to read right down, down into the very depths of his heart, and soul, that he did not notice her free hand—the hand, that is to say, that was not fondling him—suddenly stretch over his shoulder and drop a white powder in the goblet of wine on the table by his side. As some powder adhered to the side of the goblet, while some floated on the surface of the wine and would not mix, another little ruse was necessary. Marie at once rose to the occasion. With her eyes still apparently on those of her adoring husband, she pressed his face gently, but at the same time very firmly against her jewelled bosom, while she coolly leaned forward and very carefully and deliberately mixed the refractory white powder with the rich, red wine. When that was done, she kissed the Marquis several times

on the forehead, and then, in merry, playful accents, told him to sit up and drink to the approaching anniversary of their marriage.

Without the slightest suspicion of what had just taken place, the artless de Brinvilliers obeyed. A few minutes later he was writhing in agony on the ground, while Marie, with one deliciously cool hand on his forehead, was bending over him, her eyes full of smiles—this time real smiles.

The Marquis did not die readily, but Marie repeated the dose, and went on repeating it, till her efforts were in the end rewarded and the foolish, doting de Brinvilliers at last succumbed* and was gathered to his forefathers.

She then turned her attention to her father. Her task here was much more difficult. M. Dreux d'Aubray being proof against her flatteries and caresses, she had to devise some other plan of campaign. First of all, however, she succeeded, though not without considerable trouble, in getting Sainte-Croix released from prison, and when that was done, she consulted with him as to the best method of disposing of her father.

Poison being agreed on, it was decided at first to take one of the servants in M. d'Aubray's establishment into their confidence and bribe him to administer the poison, but, on second thoughts, it was considered advisable to abandon this project, and Marie resolved to commit the murder herself. As to how exactly she did it, there are various versions. One can only suppose, however, that

* According to some writers he suspected her all along, but I decline to believe this.

she resorted once again to her sublime powers of acting, and that it was through those powers, aided, of course, by the wondrous beauty and fascination of her eyes, that she at length got round her irate father, to such a degree that she was once again not only admitted to his house, but given the complete run of it. From the very moment this took place his fate was settled. It was simply a case of de Brinvilliers over again. A seat on the arm of his chair during meal times, much fondling, the pressing of the dear head—this time the dear old head—to her calm, jewelled bosom, the mixing of the powder with the wine, and then the kiss—always the kiss before death.

M. Dreux d'Aubray was more stubborn, however, than the Marquis ; he clung much more obstinately to life ; and Marie had to dose him repeatedly before she finally had the satisfaction of watching him expire. And as she hated him with all the venom of her nature, which was pretty considerable, her satisfaction was intense. She is said to have kicked him in the face as he lay groaning and writhing at her feet, and if this is true, there is little doubt she kicked him hard, very, very hard.

Poisoning had now become her pet hobby and the practice of it such a joy to her that she determined to poison her two brothers and sister. One of them fell a very easy victim, she probably dosed him in much the same manner as she had dosed her husband and father, but the other brother proved more troublesome, and she

had, eventually, to employ one of her servants, called La Chaussée, to do the deed for her.

Her attempt on her sister's life proved so unsuccessful that she thought it discreet not to try again, at any rate for a time, and during this interval of waiting, the unexpected happened. Sainte-Croix had been re-arrested, on what charge exactly is not certain, but he died one day, through inhaling the fumes of some poisons he was preparing.

Among the articles he left was a box directed to the Marquise de Brinvilliers, and on its being opened by the prison authorities, it was found to contain various poisons, together with a number of letters that proved beyond any doubt that Marie de Brinvilliers was guilty of the murder of one of her brothers ; and was preparing to murder the other.

Informed by friends and spies of the discovery, Marie at once fled to England, but finding that country too hot to hold her, she went to Holland and thence to Liège. She was eventually arrested at the latter place by an astute French detective called Des Grais, who made arrangements to take her at once to Paris. For some part of the journey they shared the inside of a coach, and given this opportunity Marie tried every device that lay in her power to demoralise her captor. For once, however, her fondlings and kisses and even the magic of her eyes failed, and though there is little doubt Des Grais derived considerable enjoyment from her attentions, of which he probably took full advantage, he

nevertheless proved faithful to his trust ; and the eventful journey ended, he handed her over to the prison authorities in Paris.

It is not my intention to enter into any of the details of the Trial, many accounts of which, in full, have already been published. It is sufficient to say she was proved guilty of the many crimes laid to her charge, that she is alleged to have fully confessed, and that she was, in due course, executed. With the falling of her pretty head on the scaffold in Paris, July 16th, 1676, there passed out of earthly existence not merely a multi-murderess* and an astute assassin, but a woman of quite exceptional ability, a top-hole beauty, that, grasping to the fullest extent the intrinsic value of one and all her physical attractions, utilized them to the utmost, whenever and wherever it served her purpose. More than that, she undoubtedly saw humour in the bestowing of kisses on her victims, and a real sense of humour, be it grim and saturnine, or otherwise, is rare.

* As one or two later day writers have asserted.

CHAPTER V

BIANCA CAPELLO

ABOUT the year 1560 a young man of pleasing manners and appearance, called Piero Buonaventura* was in the employ of the Salviati Bank in Venice. His parents lived in Florence and, though of highly-respectable origin, were in such reduced circumstances, that they were glad to receive what little pecuniary aid Piero could, from time to time, afford them.

Now, despite his commercial training and vocation, Piero was a bit of a dreamer, and when not desperately rushed with work, used to delight in gazing out of the windows of the Bank at the beautiful and stately palace of Bartolommeo Capello, one of the most illustrious nobles in all Venice. The Bank was exactly opposite the Palace.

“If only,” Piero sighed, “I had been born rich I might have lived in a fine place like that, instead of where I do.” And he shuddered as he thought of his miserable attic in one of the mean, winding little thoroughfares at the back of the Salviati building, in the most unfashionable part of the city.

* Spelt also Buonaventuri.

He was musing thus one afternoon when the Manager of the Bank sent for him, and he found himself in the presence of no less an august person than Bartolommeo Capello and his daughter Bianca. Piero had previously only seen Bianca in the distance when she drove past the Bank in her carriage, or passed along one of the canals in a gondola, and he had not been able to form any opinion as to her appearance ; but now that he saw her at close quarters he was dazzled.

And small wonder, for there were few, if any, fairer in Venice. Some years later, when she was about twenty-one, Titian, upon seeing her, was so inspired that he asked permission to paint her, and his portrait* of her is one of the most beautiful of all his works. According to him she had large, blue eyes, a medium-sized and well-formed nose, a very pretty mouth and chin ; a rather high and full forehead and that auburn red hair peculiar to Venice. Even to-day, when tastes have so greatly changed and the portraits of people who, long years ago, were considered great beauties now strike us as almost comically plain, Titian's representation of Bianca is more than merely pleasing. Bob or shingle her hair and dress her in a modern costume and she would, undoubtedly, be termed by even the most fastidious of the youth of to-day a very pretty girl.

Though Titian confined himself to depicting her face, various accounts of her lead one to suppose she was in perfect harmony ; her figure slender and petite ,

* It hung at one time in the Torre del Gallo.

her hands and feet small and beautifully fashioned. Certain it is that the humble Piero thought so, for she so fascinated him that for some seconds he could only stare at her in speechless wonder and astonishment.

The voice of the Bank Manager, however, curt and sharp, speedily brought him to his senses and made him mindful of his position.

“ I wish you to carry a parcel for this gentleman,” the Manager was saying. “ You are to take it to the Palace. Get ready at once.”

Piero bowed humbly and picking up the bag he had to take, and staggering under its weight, for it was so heavy it nearly tore his muscles out, he followed the illustrious nobleman and his daughter to the palatial building opposite. Thus it was that he saw Bianca Capello for the first time properly.

That night he dreamed of her. Dreamed of her as he had seen her in the room at the Bank, looking at him rather curiously from under her long, dark eyelashes. Dreamed of her as he had seen her, when staggering in her wake, he had sweated under the weight of her father's goods. Dreamed of her as he had seen her when she had passed through the great doorway of the palace, her red-gold hair and ornaments glittering in the sun, without once turning her pretty head to look at him.

Nor did night end his dreams. Back at the Bank her face haunted him at his work. On the back of each golden ducat he handled he saw her face ; her blue eyes

looked up at him from bank books and desk ; while every time he caught the glint and glimmer of the sunshine on woodwork or wall, he thought of her red-gold hair and pearl-covered neck.

His castles in the air, now more numerous than ever, were transfigured with her presence ; she shed a halo on them all and smiled down at him from every staircase, battlement and window. The balance sheets suffered, of course, and Piero had to work hours overtime trying to make them come right.

Determined to see Bianca again, he took to haunting the proximity of the Palace, and was at length rewarded by a vision of her standing at one of the windows. She was leaning on the sill, gazing at the sunset, and chancing to look down, as he looked up, their eyes met.

If not actually handsome, Piero was prepossessing, and with all the adoration of a strangely imaginative nature in his fine, dark eyes, he captivated Bianca's fancy. He was a novelty, something in distinct contrast to the overdressed, finicky fops and dandies she was accustomed to meet in the gilded salons of the Capello palace. So her blue eyes softened, while her thin red lips relaxed into a smile, revealing, as they did so, a very fine set of snowy white teeth. Words followed looks ; and thus the acquaintance between the two commenced. Soon an assignation was made and kept, and under the starry splendour of a Venetian sky, in a spot carefully selected on account of its utter sequestration,

lips met lips in a first long kiss, such as the warm, passionate natures of the South are alone capable of appreciating.

When they at length parted for the night, Bianca to steal stealthily into the Palace through an obscure side entrance, and Piero to hasten homewards down rough-paved alleys and narrow, winding, shadow-laden lanes, they each felt life would be quite unendurable without the other and that they were, unquestionably, tremendously in love.

So it began, Bianca being at that time about sixteen. Realizing it would be quite impossible to gain the consent of Bianca's parents to their marriage, as Bartolommeo Capello was very proud and ambitious and no doubt hoped that Bianca would one day wed some very powerful prince or duke, Piero proposed they should elope and go to his home in Florence. At first Bianca demurred. The risk of discovery was so great ; then the journey would be difficult, and what about the future ? What did Piero propose doing ; would he be able to keep himself and her ?

Piero's imagination, the generator of his day-dreams, stood him in need. He depicted the future in such glowing colours, his success, when he had accomplished all he hoped to do and felt sure he would do, when he had found scope for his wonderful powers of invention, that Bianca was dazzled. His enthusiasm awoke hers, and she eventually promised to elope with him.

A dark, moonless night was chosen for the enterprise. Close to the Capello Palace flowed one of those numerous canals that are to this day the principal feature of Venice. Here on the bosom of the still and slimy water rested a large gondola under shadow of a bridge. It was one Piero had hired for the occasion, and which he never intended to return.

The clock of a neighbouring church sounded midnight, and the echoes of its last chime had scarce died away, when a figure, hardly recognizable as that of a woman, so disguised was it in the folds of a long black cloak, emerged from a neighbouring street and hurriedly approaching the bridge, tapped the rough cobble stones three times in rapid succession with the high heel of her tiny shoe.

With an exclamation of joy, Piero, who was seated in the gondola, immediately stood up and in low tones called out :

“ Bianca, is that you ? ”

“ Yes,” a voice whispered, “ but for Heaven’s sake be quick. I’m afraid someone saw me and unless we get a good start, we shall be caught. All the gondolas in Venice will be after us.”

At the imminent risk of breaking her neck she ran down the slippery stone steps leading to the water’s edge and by the aid of her lover’s outstretched hands stepped safely into the gondola. Directly she was seated, Piero pushed off, and in another moment was rowing with every atom of strength he possessed. Fortunately for them

both, Bianca had been mistaken. No one had noticed her departure from the Castle, and when the discovery was eventually made, which was not until the morning, they were many miles from the city.

On learning the news all Venice was furious. Had Piero been a Venetian it would have been bad enough, but a Florentine—there was still a feud between the two cities—and a poor one at that—a mere clerk—why it was monstrous, unthinkable, and all the aristocracy of Venice felt aggrieved.

Bartolommeo Capello offered a large reward to anyone who would bring Piero back to Venice, either alive or dead, and other noblemen in the city increased it. It was of no avail, however, the lovers reached Florence without mishap, and, once there, they were safe. Only too glad to take a rise out of the Venetians, the Florentines regarded the elopement in the light of a huge joke, and laughed long and loud at the outcry made by the infuriated Bartolommeo.

Bianca laughed, too, at first, but not, however, for very long. Piero's parents were poor. They lived in a small house in the Piazza of St. Mark and only kept one maid, who had to cook, run errands and do all the house work in addition. When Piero and Bianca arrived they dispensed with her services, and Bianca was speedily converted, willy nilly, into a house drudge. Imagine a girl, young and beautiful, the pampered and petted daughter of a nobleman, brought up in idleness and used to every kind of luxury, being suddenly transported from

a palace to a hovel, for the dwelling place of the Buonaventuras was little better, and expected, if not actually made, to cook, clean and do everything there was to be done in the wretched little abode. It was a real love test and Bianca might possibly have stood it and emerged with flying colours had Piero behaved differently. There is little doubt, however, that his love for her waned as soon as he realized she was his, and when he saw her shorn of all finery and transformed into a mere slut, he scorned and even on occasions ill-used her. Then, one day, the unexpected happened.

Bianca was looking out of one of the windows of the house, devoutly wishing herself back in Venice and Piero and his grumbling parents at the bottom of the sea, when a tall, handsomely-dressed man, accompanied by several others, passed by the house and looked up at her. She smiled, probably in sheer delight at seeing one of her own class again, and he promptly raised his plumed cap and smiled back at her.

That evening Bianca received a note, asking her to meet the good-looking stranger at the house of the Marchesa Mondragone, wife of the tutor to Francesco de Medici, Duke of Tuscany. Perceiving in the adventure a possible opportunity of escaping from the thralldom that was daily becoming more and more irksome to her, Bianca at once sent back word to say she would be there, and at the appointed hour, clad in all her discarded finery, made her way silently and secretly to the place of assignation.

On reaching the Marchesa's house Bianca learned, to her astonishment and intense satisfaction, that the handsome stranger who had asked her to meet him there was none other than Francesco de Medici, Duke of Tuscany.*

The Duke did not keep her waiting long, so impatient was he to make her acquaintance, and his gratification knew no bounds when he saw her dressed in a rich costume, her fingers and arms adorned with gleaming jewels, all, presumably, put on especially to please him.

What they actually said history does not relate, nor does it tell us all that transpired during the several hours they were closetted together. From the fact, however, that before parting Bianca had arranged to become the Duke's mistress, it may be safely surmised that the Duke's love-making was of a progressive order, and that the long and passionate kiss which accompanied their *au revoir* was by no means the first they had exchanged during the interview.

Though it would have been quite easy, of course, for the Duke to have had Piero quietly put out of the way,—unwanted and troublesome husbands were often served thus in those days—the Duke, for some reason or another,

* Following upon the present day fashion of whitewashing all women, no matter how heinous their sins and crimes, certain present day writers have tried to make out Bianca Capello acted quite innocently in keeping the appointment and that her subsequent behaviour on discovering the Duke's intentions to her was such as proved her to be a woman of strict virtue and modesty. Unfortunately, however, for such writers, history has credited her with a very different character, and there is every reason to believe Bianca met her seducer more than half-way.

decided to let him live, and suggested offering him a lucrative post at Court.

“While he is attending to his duties, dear one,” the Duke lisped, holding Bianca in his arms and every now and then pressing her slender fingers to his rather loose, sensual lips, “I can be with you. You shall have apartments close to the Palace.”

This was exactly what Bianca wanted. She would have willingly bartered her soul in order to get away from the miserable abode of her parents-in-law. On returning home she said nothing to Piero but pretended she had been detained at the house of some friend.

The following day, a messenger arrived from the Duke with a letter for Piero, informing him he had been appointed to a post at Court and desiring him to move into his allotted quarters close to the ducal palace at once.

“He must have seen me out of doors and been struck by my appearance,” Piero exclaimed. “See what comes of having a handsome face and aristocratic bearing,” and in a transport of joy he caught hold of his decrepit father and commenced dancing round the room with him. Then he embraced his bedridden mother, and after kissing his baby daughter,* he condescended to kiss Bianca.

That evening saw them both in the most sumptuous rooms adjoining the Duke’s palace.

* Pellegrina, who afterwards married Ulisse Bentivoglio.

Piero found a wardrobe well stocked with clothes, and obeying the mandate of the Duke, he presented himself the next morning at Court and at once entered upon his new duties.

While he was thus engaged, the Duke visited Bianca, and made love to her with even greater persistency than he had previously, and so it went on. Every day, while Piero was performing his functions at Court, making himself more and more hated by reason of his ever-growing arrogance and insolence, the Duke was closetted with Bianca, Bianca clad in the most magnificent of gowns, her white arms covered with gold bracelets and the coils of her auburn hair with sparkling gems.

“It’s a pity your husband is not more tactful,”* he is said to have remarked on one of these occasions, when Bianca was sitting by his side, fondling him. “He does his work well, but he makes enemies. Not only his subordinates but the nobles complain of his rudeness and arbitrary manner. What can be done?”

“Ah, let me think, my Lord,” Bianca said softly, laying one of her cool white hands on the Duke’s. “It will take some consideration. He has certainly degenerated.”

“You still love him,” the Duke remarked.

Bianca shrugged her shoulders.

“Can I love a man who once, instead of treating me as a wife, made me his lackey, a mere household drudge? Believe me, I had to wait on him and his detestable

* Or words to this effect,

parents hand and foot, and I was bullied and despised and even, on occasions, beaten by them."

"Beaten!" the Duke ejaculated. "My beautiful Bianca, beaten."

"Aye!" Bianca responded, biting her thin red lips. "Both Piero and his father used to strike me, but I would willingly go through it all again if only I were certain Piero loved me. But I am not certain of that, for he is always boasting of how much he is admired by the Court ladies, and only the other day I found a note from one of them in his clothes."

"The dastard!" Francesco said hotly. "There is no doubt he is a worthless fellow, a thoroughly dissolute reprobate, a young villain. 'Tis a pity——"

"Yes," Bianca said, softly, nestling closer to the Duke as she spoke. "'Tis a pity, dear-heart."

"That such a man should go on living," Francesco added, "but he need not, you know, if you wish. Do you wish?"

Bianca was silent, and her long, tapering fingers beat gently on the Duke's bare wrist.

"You needn't say so in actual words, you know," the Duke laughed, his head sinking back among the soft velvet cushions. "You have only to kiss me."

Bianca paused for a moment, and then bending over him, pressed her beautiful lips passionately to his.

The following evening the body of Piero was lying at

the corner of the Via Maggio, near the Ponte Sta Trinita. He had been brutally murdered.*

But although Bianca was now a widow, free to marry whom she willed, with no troublesome parents-in-law to bother or intimidate her any more, for she need, of course, have nothing further to do with the Buonaventura family, she soon had other and much more powerful and malignant enemies to consider.

It was not long before Francesco's wife, Joanna, formerly the Archduchess of Austria, got to know of Bianca's relationship with the Duke, and mad with hatred and jealousy, she tried her hardest to persuade her brother, the Emperor, to interfere and insist on her rival's expulsion from Florence. The Emperor, however, having reasons of his own just then for not wishing to quarrel with the Duke, merely remonstrated with him. The latter, of course, told Bianca what the Emperor had either said or written, and although it was plain to them both that Joanna had, so far at least, failed in her endeavours, it was equally plain to them that a new and dangerous situation had arisen. Whether the kisses Bianca now showered on Francesco were reminiscent of that former one of hers or not, one cannot of course say, history does not tell us, but it is certainly rather signi-

* Some writers have tried to make out the deed was actually committed by a member of the Ricci family, whom Piero had insulted, but most historians agree that there is very little doubt it was really planned by the Grand Duke Francesco himself.

ficant that not so very long after Joanna besought her brother, the Emperor's intervention, she was taken suddenly with some mysterious illness and died.*

Francesco did not remain long a widower. Very shortly after Joanna died** he married Bianca. They were married privately in the little chapel in the Palazzo Vecchio, and the following year they went through the ceremony again in San Lorenzo, it being accompanied this time with a display of magnificence rarely if ever surpassed in Florence.

Bianca being now a Grand Duchess, albeit a Grand Duchess of a rival city, her parents behaved very differently towards her, and soon between her and them a complete reconciliation took place. But Bianca still had one enemy to reckon with, namely, Francesco's brother Ferdinand, the Cardinal.

For a variety of reasons, Ferdinand disliked her. At first, however, he maintained a more or less cautious and reserved attitude, concealing his antagonism under a cloak of cold formality, and it was not until Bianca's brother, Vittorio Capello, became the confidant and adviser of the Grand Duke, that he showed his hand.

Fearing, as many other Florentines feared, too, that Florence was fast falling into the hands of a thoroughly scheming and unscrupulous alien family, for the Floren-

* The significance becomes all the deeper when it is recollected that murder in high circles in Italy at that time was by no means uncommon. Some time previous, for instance, Piero dei Medici, Francesco's brother, had murdered his wife Eleonora of Toledo for alleged infidelity, while Isabella dei Medici had been strangled by her husband, Paolo Giordano Orsini, for the same reason.

** Her death occurred in 1578.

tines at that date regarded the Venetians as foreigners, he tried his hardest to persuade the Grand Duke to get rid of Vittorio. In this, however, he failed, for wily and persevering as he was, Bianca proved more than a match for him. Whenever Francesco showed any sign of yielding to his arguments, her kisses intervened, and Vittorio remained.

War once declared, however, the situation, to say the least of it, became awkward, both for Bianca and her brother ; and to Bianca it soon became intolerable.

Then, one day, the Cardinal, to his surprise, received a letter from the Grand Duchess, expressing her very great regret at the differences that had arisen between them and hoping that he would show his readiness to forget the past by accepting an invitation to stay with her and her husband at the Villa of Poggio a Caiano, one of Francesco's country residences.

The letter being written with all apparent sincerity, the Cardinal accepted, and, in due course, arrived at the villa, where he was received by Bianca with the greatest cordiality. Time passed pleasantly. During the day there were expeditions to the neighbouring woods in search of game, excursions to the hills, and picnics on the water, and in the evening music and entertainment of all sorts, everyone apparently happy and all thoroughly enjoying themselves.

Then, one evening, tragedy. The Duke and the Cardinal, on returning home, hot and weary from the chase, were greeted effusively by Bianca.

“What have you been doing in our absence?” the Duke asked laughingly. “Making those tartlets you spoke about last night?”

Bianca nodded.

“Is Ferdinand to be allowed to taste them?” the Duke asked again, still laughing. “Come, a kiss, sweetheart, for yes.”

Bianca promptly kissed him, and the tartlets being then brought in, were handed, together with a goblet of sparkling wine, to Ferdinand.

“No, brother,” he said, his rather hard, cynical lips relaxing into a curious smile, “you try one first. I always make a point, especially when I am visiting, of eating and drinking *after* someone else.”

The Duke and Bianca protested. It was of no avail, however, and eventually Francesco took a tartlet and very gingerly bit a piece out of it.

The next moment he turned ghastly pale.

“Is anything the matter, brother?” Ferdinand said, suavely. “Aren’t you well?”

“Not very,” the Grand Duke stuttered. “I—I feel ——” but he could not go on. Tottering, he clutched wildly at the table near him for support, and fell with a crash to the ground.

“I thought so,” the Cardinal said quietly. “That is why you were both so anxious that I should eat first. Give me those tartlets.”

His voice grew menacing as he spoke, but before he could snatch the silver dish containing the tartlets from

Bianca's hand, she had bitten a piece out of one of them and swallowed it.*

Thus these two partners in sin and crime perished simultaneously, side by side, and the only good posterity can say of them is that they really loved one another, if indeed, love, which is a high and spiritual emotion, can exist between two sinners of so deep a dye.

* Certain writers, no doubt influenced by present day feminism, which refuses to see wrong in any woman, have tried to make out that Francesco died a natural death and that Bianca is a much maligned person, but history and tradition both aver otherwise, and there is little doubt the Grand Duke was actually poisoned in the circumstances I have described.

CHAPTER VI

PRETTY MARY BLANDY, PARRICIDE

THOUGH the parents of Mary Blandy doted on her and allowed her to have her own way in nearly everything, there was just one matter regarding which they insisted on exercising their parental authority, and that was her marriage.

“It took me years of incessant toil” (intrigue, perhaps, would have been a more correct word), Blandy used constantly to say to his daughter, “to make enough in my profession as attorney to retire on, and I don’t want you to throw it all away on some penniless fortune hunter. Money should wed money.”

Now, as this happened to be Mary’s view, too, for she was terribly mercenary, even as a small child, she readily assented, and promised she would never give the slightest encouragement to any man, without having satisfied herself, first of all, that he had money in the bank, and plenty of it, too. Thus it came about that, at twenty years of age or thereabouts, Mary was still single, for the simple reason that none of the young men that had proposed to her were, in her and Mr. Blandy’s estimation, well off.

PRETTY MARY BLANDY, PARRICIDE

Now, it so happened that at about the time Ma refused a poor but good-looking young farmer, who, apparently, was genuinely attached to her, Captain William Cranstoun, son of Lord Cranstoun, and nephew of Lord Mark Ker, came to Oxfordshire in search of recruits for his regiment. After visiting a number of villages and raking in every youth he could find, he at last came to Henley, and chancing to see Mary Blandy, one day, riding in the neighbourhood, he asked a man, whose acquaintance he had made in the village and who happened to be passing, who she was.

"Miss Blandy," the man replied. "Her father is one of the wealthiest people in the place. She's an only child, and, if there's any truth in rumour, she'll come into a pot of money."

"Will she?" Cranstoun remarked carelessly, and at the same time flicking a speck of dust from his tunic; (mentally, he was resolving to find out, for certain, if what he had just heard was true.) "Will she, by Jove. Going to be married soon, I suppose?"

"Not that I know of," his informant replied. "I don't think she's engaged. I've never heard that she was."

The Captain gave vent to a whistle.

"Not engaged!" he ejaculated. "That's odd. Money and looks, for, 'pon my soul, she's pretty, and no lover. Incomprehensible, quite." And to himself he exclaimed: "Capital! What luck!"

"I didn't say no lovers," the man observed. "She's

had plenty that I know of. I said she's not engaged, and for this reason. None of the young men about here are rich enough. Old Blandy is terribly avaricious, that's how he made his pile."

"Oh!" the Captain laughed, "the same old tale—a case of the eternal, or, to be more correct, perhaps, infernal shekels. Well, I don't blame the old man for not wanting his daughter to marry some needy adventurer; there are too many, far too many of that ilk about."

The conversation ended there, and the Captain at once set off in search of someone who could give him reliable information regarding the state of Mr. Blandy's finances.

Having at length found that person, and being satisfied that Mr. Blandy really had money, and that his one and only child, Mary, was generally regarded as his heiress, he next considered how he could get an introduction to her. History does not tell us what manner of means the Captain employed to this end, but no matter what the method adopted, it was certainly successful, for the Captain, from that day onward, became a constant visitor at the Blandys' house.

It was speedily apparent that the Captain's main object in coming to the house was not to see Mary's parents; he was always studiously polite and attentive to them, but it was to Mary herself that he addressed most of his conversation, and it was at her that he most persistently looked.

A very short acquaintance, it appears, was sufficient

to excite the flame of passion in Mary's heart, and there is but little doubt she met the gallant Captain's advances more than half way, though he was nearly old enough to be her father.

Fearing that certain information, relating to the existence of someone who possessed a better right to his affections, might reach her ears, Cranstoun informed her that he was engaged in a disagreeable lawsuit with a young lady in Scotland who had claimed him as a husband; but, he assured her, it was a mere affair of gallantry, from the unexpected disagreeable results of which the law would, in the course of a very short time, relieve him.

He then asked Mary to marry him, and having gained her consent, proceeded to interview her parents, obtaining from them also an easy acquiescence. Mr. and Mrs. Blandy, in fact, somewhat dazzled, perhaps, by the superior social position of their daughter's suitor, had all along shown that they would be only too willing to sanction the match.

So far, then, all had gone well, at least as far as Cranstoun was concerned, but matters now began to go against him. He was really a married man, and with his wife, formerly a Miss Murray, he had received a considerable fortune.

Lord Ker knowing this, and hearing of his engagement to Miss Blandy, at once informed Mr. Blandy, with the result there was a stormy interview between Mr. Blandy and the Captain.

Thanks, mainly, to Mrs. Blandy, who was strongly prejudiced in favour of him, Cranstoun succeeded in pacifying Mr. Blandy by pretending that the allegations made against him by Lord Ker were entirely false.

Soon after this Mrs. Blandy died, and Mr. Blandy received a further communication from Lord Ker, corroborating the former allegations against Cranstoun and offering him the most convincing evidence of their truth.

Satisfied now that Cranstoun was a rogue, Mr. Blandy followed the latter and his daughter into the garden one day, and observing them sit down, watched them from behind a neighbouring tree.

He was not quite near enough to overhear their conversation, for they spoke in very low tones, but Mr. Blandy had strong suspicions that the Captain was making love to his daughter. With momentarily increasing wrath he strained his eyes and ears and presently saw one of Cranstoun's arms steal round Mary's slim waist. In another instant, and before Mr. Blandy could fully grasp what was happening, it was all done so quickly, the Captain's face was pressed close to Mary's, and the lips of the two met.

With a shout of fury Mr. Blandy rushed out from behind the tree and seizing the Captain by the coat collar, shook him, shook him with every atom of strength he had in his body, gasping out as he did so :

“ Villain, villain, what do you mean by it ? What do you mean by it ? ”

"S' death," Cranstoun cried, struggling to his feet and trying to disengage himself, for the old man, puny though he was, clung to him like a baboon. "S' death, sir, it's for me to ask you that. What the devil do you mean by half strangling me and spoiling my new cravat?"

"Are you mad, father?" Mary Blandy chipped in. "Willie has a perfect right to kiss me. We are engaged."

"Engaged!" Mr. Blandy panted, leaning against the back of the seat for support. "Why, what damned nonsense! He is already married."

"I know that, father," Mary Blandy replied calmly. "William has told me all about his marriage in Scotland. He has kept nothing from me, have you, William?" And laying one hand on Captain Cranstoun's arm, she gazed fondly into his face.

"Why, no, of course not," Cranstoun answered, trying to rearrange his clothes and at the same time recover his equanimity, for he was horribly ruffled. "I won't prevaricate any longer, Mr. Blandy. I am married. I had the misfortune, Mr. Blandy, to marry a very bad woman, from whom I am trying at this very moment to get a divorce, and from the proofs I have of her infidelity, I am bound to succeed, and directly I obtain the decree of the Supreme Court of Session, I shall hope to marry Mary."

"You may hope, sir," Mr. Blandy said, "but you won't marry her. I will never give my consent. And mark me, sir, if you marry Mary without it, you will marry a beggar. She won't have a penny of my money."

"Really, sir," Cranstoun expostulated, "really, sir, you are devilish unreasonable. 'Pon my honour you are."

"He will retract," Mary Blandy said, going up to her father and placing one hand appealingly on his arm, "won't you, father?"

"No," Mr. Blandy exclaimed, angrily, "I won't. What I said is final. I not only will never consider the idea of Captain Cranstoun marrying you, but I forbid him ever to see you again, or to communicate in any way with you."

It was in vain Mary expostulated. Tears and prayers proved of no avail, and the Captain left the house, threatened with instant expulsion and legal proceedings if he ever dared to show his face there again.

Mary, however, was as obstinate as her father. Despite the fact, as I have said, that the Captain was nearly double her age, she was passionately fond of him, and she determined to marry him at all costs.

In order to lull her father's suspicions, she pretended to abandon all thoughts of marriage with Cranstoun, and carried on flirtations with various young men in the neighbourhood. All the while, however, she not only corresponded with Cranstoun, but the two used to meet whenever and wherever an opportunity presented itself.

One evening Cranstoun was late. Mary Blandy, who had never once kept her lover waiting, arrived, as usual, at the appointed hour, but he had not come.

"It's too bad of him, too bad," Mary kept remarking petulantly, as she paced to and fro under the shadow of a great elm in a field to the south of Henley, "to treat me like this. He can't really be fond of me. And yet, would he, could he look at me in the way he does, unless his heart were really and truly mine? How I——"

But at this moment Cranstoun loomed in the distance, and with a cry of joy she ran towards him.

"Why, Willie," she said, after they had exchanged rather more than the usual number of kisses, and he was leaning against the tree trunk quite exhausted, "you look very serious. What is troubling you?"

"Why," Cranstoun exclaimed, savagely, "I've lost my suit. The damned Court of Session has refused me a decree."

"Willie!" Mary gasped, "you don't mean it?"

"Oh, but I do," Cranstoun said, furiously. "Her tears did it. That's where a woman always has the pull. She has only to turn the tap on and start howling, and everyone at once believes her. 'I've been true to him, always true,' she whimpered. 'I've never loved or even looked at any other man, and I never will.' Never will," Cranstoun sneered. "I wish to God some Buccaneer would kidnap her."

"We can't marry now, Willie, that's certain," Mary said, sorrowfully, "all my castles in the air are shattered and my plans for our future happiness destroyed." And she burst out crying.

Cranstoun bit his lips thoughtfully.

"Look here, Mary," he said at length, stirring the dry soil in front of him with his riding whip. "There's no need to be so confoundedly upset. We needn't despair yet."

"It's hopeless," Mary sobbed.

"I'm not so sure," Cranstoun rejoined. "You know how resourceful I am, and if I put my thinking cap on, I've no doubt I shall find some way of terminating our difficulties. Leave it to me, Mary, and in the meanwhile don't breathe a word of what I've told you to your father."

"I'm not quite so silly," Mary replied. "If I did, he would, of course, want to know from whom I got my information."

Cranstoun made no response to this, but after maintaining silence for a while, suddenly remarked :

"Mary, I have an idea. You remember me telling you many of the Highlanders possess second sight and other strange powers ? "

"Yes, what of it, dearest ? " Mary said mournfully.

"Why," Cranstoun exclaimed, "not far from where I was staying last year in Perthshire, there's an old Highland woman who sells love charms to young people who are in love and desire their love to be reciprocated."

"They must be very simple young people," Mary laughed, "to be deceived in that way. Father wouldn't swallow one."

"You can provide against that contingency," Cranstoun said. "Mix it with his food and let him take it

unwittingly. I will send you one when I go to Scotland."

Cranstoun was as good as his word. He went to Scotland a few days later, and in due course of time Mary received a packet containing the mysterious powder. The night before it arrived she had a strange dream. She thought she was standing on the sea bottom, under a great wall of rock that rose perpendicularly several hundreds of feet above the surface of the water. Through the green and limpid twilight, the sea floor, covered with sand and shells and huge smooth-washed boulders, could be seen stretching away in front and on either side of her till lost in the dim distance. Fish of various kinds and sizes, some very large and terrifying, and others quite small and of a very beautiful colour, swam silently to and fro, while enormous crabs and other scaly things, never seen by living human eye, crawled about in all directions.

Suddenly, there was a loud splash, followed by a queer, frightened movement among the fish, and Mary saw the body of a man come plunging head first through the water above her, down, down, down, till it struck the sand a few feet from where she was standing. It then rolled over on its back and lay quite still and motionless.

Yielding to an irresistible curiosity, Mary looked at the dead man's face, and was horrified to see it was that of her father.

The shock was so great, indeed, that she awoke, literally sweating with terror.

The dream greatly impressed her. There was something very ominous about it, those green, silent depths, the huge fish with their cruel, bared teeth and gleaming, malevolent eyes, and that white-faced corpse. It seemed intended as a warning of some coming catastrophe, and fearful now of having anything to do with the love powder, she wrote to Cranstoun at once to that effect. Some days later she received a second letter from him. The wording of it was somewhat enigmatical, but there was no mistaking the meaning. The only obstacle in their path of happiness was a man too old and infirm to be of much use in the world. If he were to die now all the money he possessed would be Mary's and she could marry whom she liked, but if he went on living, not only would she be unable to marry the man of her choice, but her crotchety old father might take it into his head to make another will and leave all his fortune to someone else.

"The powder I sent you," Cranstoun wrote, "will provide against such a contingency, and bring you to me at once. For God's sake use it, but for both our sakes **BE CAREFUL.**" And in a P.S.: "Don't pay any attention to your dream. It was just a nightmare. Something you had eaten had evidently disagreed with you."

Mary read the letter not once but many times, and being naturally astute, understood the significance of it. But it did not shock her. She had never really cared for her father, kind and indulgent though he had been.

Besides, he was old, and she didn't like old people, especially old men ; they were very boring, and her father was no exception.

" Why should he stand in the way of happiness," she mused. " In the nature of things he hasn't much longer to live, and he might just as well die now, as ten years hence."

The more she pondered over it, the more the idea appealed to her, until at last she decided to do the deed, and in order to brace herself up for the occasion, she drank more than she was wont of her father's choicest wine, which so elated her that she remarked to the maid who was dressing her for dinner :

" Susan, who wouldn't send an old fellow to hell for a thousand pounds. I would, wouldn't you ? "

Although used to hearing her mistress saying all kinds of naughty things, for she was very much in her confidence, Susan was shocked at this, especially as she knew about Mary's love affair and the latter's differences regarding it with Mr. Blandy, and not knowing quite what reply to make, she laughed a little dubiously, and turned the conversation. In the kitchen afterwards, however, she repeated what Mary had said to the cook, who repeated it, of course, to the other servants, so that in a very short time everyone in the house, including even Mary's father himself, had heard of it.

" Who wouldn't send an old fellow to hell for a thousand pounds ! " What a thing for a young lady to say, what an idea for a young heiress with a rich old

father even to conceive! Yet, Mary did conceive it, and the very next day proceeded to carry it into effect.

Not being very well, Mr. Blandy was keeping to his bedroom and living for the time being entirely on milk food. About supper time Mary went into the dining-room and rang the bell, and on Susan Gunnell appearing, she bade her go at once and ~~make~~ ~~some~~ make some gruel for Mr. Blandy.

"Bring it here, Susan," she said, "I will take it to him."

Albeit feeling a little apprehensive, after what had taken place the evening before, Susan obeyed, and in a few minutes returned with the gruel. Directly she had left the room, Mary took the packet of powder Cranstoun had sent her from her pocket and emptying some of the contents into the gruel, she then stirred it well, and arrayed in her most becoming gown, her pretty arms covered with bangles that gleamed and jingled at every step she took, she repaired with the gruel to her father's room.

He was sitting up in bed, propped with pillows.

"Why, what a pretty dress, Mary," he exclaimed. "It's most becoming. I've never seen you looking so pretty before. Stay with me, do, while I take this stuff."

"Stuff, indeed," Mary pouted, handing it to him, and then kissing him playfully on his bald head. "Why, Susan and I took no end of trouble with it. You must drink it, every drop."

She sat beside him, as she spoke, and while fondling

him and playing with the few remaining curls on the sides of his head, watched him all the while curiously to see if the poison was beginning to take effect. Once or twice she caught him looking at some yellow grains adhering to the rim of the bowl, and her heart gave a sickly thump, but she succeeded in diverting his attention by tickling his neck and fondling him more vigorously than before.

As nothing happened and he enjoyed a quiet, peaceful night, she brought him some tea in the morning, which contained the rest of the powder. This time her trouble was rewarded, for while she was sitting watching him, as a cat watches a mouse, his face suddenly twitched and he gave vent to a loud cry of pain.

Mary was thrilled. Had she not been possessed of wonderful self-control, she must have shown in her face the intense satisfaction this first indication of success brought her ; but in her face, as she bent over her father, only anxiety and distress were depicted.

“Father,” she exclaimed, throwing her arms round him and kissing him on the cheek, “father, is anything the matter with you ? Are you ill ? ”

For some seconds Mr. Blandy was in such frightful agony he could not speak ; he could only lie writhing on the bed, groaning and moaning ; and all the while Mary was thinking of Cranstoun and the thirty thousand pounds, and wished the end would come quickly.

“You know I am,” Mr. Blandy gasped out at last, “you know it, because you’ve poisoned me. I was

warned two days ago you wanted me out of the way, but like a fool I couldn't and wouldn't believe it. Ah!" and with a hideous grimace he began writhing again.

"Poisoned you," Mary ejaculated, looking at herself critically in the mirror over the mantelshelf and thinking that the flush due to excitement was not unbecoming, though the pale pink crêpe dress she was wearing with the narrow border of a deeper shade was not really so *chic* and fetching as the lilac-coloured gown she had worn the previous day. The turquoise bracelets, too, that she was wearing then, she said to herself, suited her better than the ruby ones she had on now.

She was recalled to earth, or rather to the fact that her father was still on it, by another frightful groan.

"Are you mad, father," she went on. "Why should I poison you?"

"To get my money and marry Cranstoun," her father gasped, his face becoming more and more convulsed and his body more and more swollen. "It's you that are mad, Mary, mad with cruelty and avarice. Oh, my God," and rolling over on one side, he tore the bed clothes in his agony.

Looking at herself in the mirror again, Mary wondered what she ought to say next.

"Go," her father panted, "go, for Heaven's sake, for directly your crime is discovered, you'll be arrested. Stay, kiss me, cruel little daughter."

Mary did as she was bid; bending over him she pressed her ruddy, pouting lips to his, and declaring again that

he had misjudged her and that she was entirely innocent of the accusation he had made, she left him.* Going to her room she packed her valise, cramming into it all the money and valuables she could lay her hands on, and then summoning the carriage, she desired to be driven at once to the nearest halting place for the North-bound mail coach.

She had arranged to meet Cranstoun either at York or some other up country town, but before she had got very far on the route she was arrested by the Police on the charge of parricide and taken to Oxford.

In jail she confessed to administering the powder to her father but declared she had no idea it was poison. She threw the entire onus of the crime on Cranstoun and expressed the greatest horror and indignation at his conduct. However, in the face of the last communication she had received from Cranstoun, her remark to Susan Gunnel, and her general bearing throughout, her guilt was obvious; and although at her trial, during the Oxford Assizes in the Spring of 1752, she told a long and very plausible tale to the jury, she was found guilty and sentenced to death. According to some accounts she spent the night before her execution in prayer, but the nature of her penitence may be gauged by the fact that she appeared on the scaffold in a most becoming gown of black bombasin, her hair prettily curled and her

* Authorities differ very much regarding this case. Whereas Mr. Camden Pelham (*vide* "The Chronicles of Crime" Vol. I, p. 150) says she remained in the house till she was arrested, other authorities, including Mr. Thistleton Dyer (*see* "Strange Pages from Family Papers") says she fled from the place at once.

arms bound with black ribbons in lieu of the usual rope.

On ascending the gallows she begged she might not be hanged high, "for the sake of decency," and on her being requested to go just a little higher, she expressed fear lest she should fall. She was allowed to give the signal of death herself, and did so by putting her little lace handkerchief over her face.

Cranstoun succeeded in escaping to France, where he was befriended and sheltered by a Mrs. Ross. Seized with a serious illness after he had been with her for some time, he became a sincere penitent, and on November 30, 1752, died, a genuine convert to the Romish faith.

CHAPTER VII

THE DARK ANGELS OF JEYPORE

JEYPORE, a native State in Rajputana, boasts a long history in which the kisses of fair women have more than once played a fateful part; and the greater number of its tragedies have been enacted in the capital, to which it has given its name. This city of Jeypore has been likened by some writers to a city in dreamland, its strange, unique beauty impressing one with a sense of unearthliness. Built on a plain and enclosed within lofty, gated walls, it contains some of the loveliest and most magnificent palaces in India. Here and there, everywhere, in fact, there are leafy groves, plentifully besprinkled with fountains and flower beds, the latter a mass of colour, brilliant it is true, but always pleasing to the eye and never merely vulgar.

Through the centre of the city, from due East to due West, runs a street, that is one of the most imposing in the Orient. Over two miles in length and of a uniform width, namely, 111 feet, it is without angle or curve, absolutely straight and absolutely level. Also, it is fringed on either side by a variety of tall and stately trees, beautiful in form and foliage, which prevent it being in any way monotonous.

But lovely as this city is in detail, its greatest charm would still seem to lie in its dream-like appearance as a whole, this appearance being due, perhaps, to the wonderful colour effects called into being, respectively, by the sun and the moon.

Viewed in the daytime, under the influence of the sun's rays, Jeypore is a city of pink and gold. The white sand of which its soil is so largely composed and the tops of its many marble statues and palaces appear to be gilded, whilst from its myriad windows, its cupolas, and gardens there seems to emanate a rosy hue, that is exquisitely soft and alluring.

Viewed in the night time, Jeypore is a city of silvery whiteness, a whiteness that, equally with the gold and pink of the daytime, is suggestive of the unreal, but of the unreal more closely allied to ghostland than to the kingdom of the houri and the fay.

And strange, indeed, are the fancies set in motion by these respective glows, the rosy-pink by day, and the silvery-white by night, for both are peculiarly unearthly, both peculiarly alluring ; and both, perhaps, generate passion. Many of the natives of the city and the surrounding country declare that these glows owe their origin only in part to the physical, the superphysical being in no small degree responsible for them. In fact, tradition and mythology attribute the actual founding of the State of Jeypore to Rama Chandra, a deified King of Oudh, reputed to be an Avatar, or incarnation of Vishnu, the second member of the Hindu Trinity, and to

his wife Sita, an incarnation of Lachmi, Goddess of Fortune.

Jeypore is not, of course, the only Indian State, which, according to the popular belief, these semi-human rulers have founded, but the inhabitants of Jeypore affirm that they have always taken a very special interest in their city, which interest they, or rather their spirits, even yet, after the lapse of so many centuries, maintain.

Thus, the pink or rose-coloured lights seen in the city by day and the silvery lights by night are said by some to be due to the spirits of Rama Chandra and Sita and certain of their descendants, known to posterity as the Suryavansi, or children of the sun, that are ever hovering around the city of Jeypore, impregnating its atmosphere with love and passion and all the emotions they were wont to feel so acutely when in the flesh and blood. Hence, they say, it is only natural that the kisses of lovely women should frequently have played an all-important rôle in the history of the State and its capital.

I have selected the stories relating to the kisses of Maroni, Kishan Kumvari and Rupa, three of Jeypore's super-fair women, for inclusion here, and I will now deal with them in turn.

There are many versions—but I shall quote only one—of the tragedy that overwhelmed the Dulka Rai, or Bridegroom King, who lost his throne to gain a girl's kisses, the kisses of Maroni, the false one. Somewhere about the year 1128 A.D., a beautiful woman, leading a

small boy by the hand, staggered wearily along a tiny path leading to the crest of a hill near the city of Jeypore. She was the wife of one of the proud Suryavansi, Princess of Narwar and Gwalior ; but, for political reasons, now an exile, she was fleeing for her life, taking her child with her, the boy Tej Karan, popularly known as the Dulka Rai.

It was some days since they had left home, and they had been tramping the country on foot, sleeping by day under trees and bushes, and continuing their flight, as soon as the fierceness of the sun's rays began to lessen. The woman had no definite goal in view, her only idea was to get away from her enemies, and as the hills seemed to offer her safer sanctuary than the plains, it was to the hills she had instinctively bent her course. Having at length reached them, she was about to climb the first of a long, gloomy ridge, when her strength suddenly gave way and she collapsed, sinking to the ground in a dead faint.

When she recovered, she looked into a strange face bending over her. It was the face of a tall, distinguished-looking man, bejewelled and armed. Luck favoured the fugitives, for he was the Meena, Chief of Rhogaon, one of the most humane and just of the many powerful rulers in that part of India.

The wife of the Suryavansi told him her tale. He believed her and took her to his home. Some say that she was never more than a guest to him, others that her great beauty found an immediate way to his heart,

making him her slave. I myself incline to the latter view. But no matter, the fugitives took up their abode with the Meena, and in course of time Tej Karan, the woman's son, grew into a fine and noble-looking youth.

Then, one day, he went hunting and, in pursuit of a doe, entered a lonely wood. He was looking there for his quarry, when a wild shriek of terror, coming apparently from the far side of a clump of bushes near to him, turned his blood to ice and rooted him to the ground. But only for a moment. Quickly pulling himself together, he plunged into the bushes, and, on coming out into the open, saw, on the margin of a pool, a desperate struggle taking place between a young girl and a crocodile. The reptile had hold of one of her arms and was about to drag her under the water.

Without losing a moment, Tej Karan ran to the girl's rescue, and raising his spear drove it with all his might into the crocodile's eye. The hideous brute then let go its hold, and falling back into deep water, sank out of sight.

Fortunately, the girl was not seriously hurt. Her numerous bracelets and bangles had prevented the creature's teeth from penetrating deeply into the flesh of her arm, so that, with the exception of one or two slight wounds and bruises, she escaped almost unscathed.

Her gratitude knew no bounds. She thanked her deliverer in the prettiest manner possible, and soon they

were chatting together as if they had known each other years.

With Tej Karan it was a case of love at first sight. Never had he seen such a vision of beauty, not even in his wildest dreams. Tall and slight, and beautifully proportioned, Maroni, for so she informed him she was called, was almost, if not absolutely, perfect. She had big, star-like eyes, a small, well-shaped nose, and a dainty mouth with red, pouting lips, and teeth like pearls. Nor was that all; she had soft, slim hands, with long fingers, and filbert-shaped nails, that shone like agates.

Tej Karan couldn't take his eyes off her; and, no matter how long he looked, he kept on discovering some fresh charm.

They sat on the ground, till the sun passed out of sight and the blood-red splashes in its wake had faded into a pale pink.

"Beloved," Maroni exclaimed at length, when, realizing that it was time to go, she languidly rose to her feet: "Beloved, promise you will meet me here to-morrow, at this same hour."

"I will," Tej Karan cried, enraptured, "I will do anything and everything you tell me."

"Seal those words with a kiss, then I shall believe you," Maroni said cunningly. She raised her face to his as she spoke, and their lips met in a deliciously long kiss, only comprehensible, perhaps, to those who are themselves of a warm and passionate nature.

When Tej Karan got home that night, he narrated the story of his rescue of Maroni to his mother and their kind protector.

"Maroni!" the latter exclaimed, his usually placid brows contracting into a frown, "I know her well, and I forbid you to meet her again. She comes of an evil and accursed stock."

"That may be," Tej Karan replied firmly, "but for all that, my most revered father, I love her, and it is she, only, whom I will wed."

Upon hearing himself thus defied by his adopted son the Chief of Rhogaon flew into a fearful passion. He told Tej Karan that sooner than see him married to Maroni, he would cause the latter to be slain and her body thrown to the crocodiles.

Neither the Chief nor his protégé slept that night, they spent hours pacing up and down their respective apartments, each vowing that he would do as he had said and have his own way.

The following evening Tej Karan set out to meet Maroni, as he had promised. She arrived at their trysting place punctually, and once again their lips met in what was to both of them a very thrilling kiss.

Tej Karan then told Maroni that he had spoken of his love for her to the Chief of Rhogaon, and that the latter had expressed his disapproval.

"He's a detestable old man," Maroni said, her dark eyes flashing fire, "and I will tell you why he hates me.

Some time before I was born, he conceived a mad passion for my mother, who was as beautiful as it is possible for any mortal woman to be. Being married and devoted to her husband, she, of course, rejected the dishonourable proposals made to her, but her refusal to comply with them only seemed to stimulate his passion, and surprising her one morning in the act of bathing, he would have molested her, had not her screams attracted the attention of my father, who was fortunately not very far away. My father overpowered the chief and would have slain him, had not my mother begged his life. And then, what do you think ! Instead of being grateful to my mother, this bad old man sought to do her all the injury he could, and finally, she became so afraid of him that she persuaded my father to leave the neighbourhood. Then, soon after I was born, my mother disappeared, and her fate was never ascertained ; but my father always believed that the old Chief of Rhogaon knew what had become of her.

“ There is worse to come. When my father died, and I grew up, the wicked old thing began to make love to me, and because, naturally, I would have nothing to do with him, he has abused and maligned me in every possible way. If you think him a good man, you are very much mistaken.”

“ What you say certainly surprises me,” Tej Karan exclaimed.

“ I swear by all that is holy I speak the truth,” Maroni said, throwing her arms round Tej. “ He is an infamous

old man, and I am just as much afraid of him as my mother was."

"Yet, he is my mother's benefactor; he saved her life and mine," Tej replied, gloomily.

"That may be," Maroni cried, "but was he disinterested? Has he not had his reward?"

Tej Karan was silent. He knew that there were rumours afloat of a scandalous nature concerning his mother and their protector, and he had seen and heard just enough to make him feel that possibly there might be some truth in them.

"Save me," Maroni whispered, looking at him piteously from under her long lashes. "That old man means to kill me. He told you so, I can read it in your face," and a shudder ran through her slim, warm body.

"What shall I do?" Tej Karan said hoarsely.

"What did you pledge yourself to do last night?" Maroni whispered.

"Anything and everything you wish," Tej Karan stammered.

"Then kill him," Maroni said fiercely. "It is either his life or mine! Look at me."

Tej Karan obeyed; and her great star-like eyes so thrilled him, that he at once submitted to her proposition that he should take a message from her to the Chief of Rhogaon, asking the latter to meet her at a certain spot the following afternoon, as she had something of importance to communicate to him; and then, when he came

to the spot that she had named, as he was pretty sure to do, they should both fall upon him, and kill him, and thrust his body into a well that was close by.

“Remember,” Maroni whispered, “that he sought my mother’s dishonour, and not only my mother’s, but mine. Surely you cannot punish him enough for that.”

Tej Karan bowed his head. He assented, but his mind was full of conflicting emotions, and words failed him. He delivered Maroni’s message as soon as he got home, and on receipt of it, the Chief of Rhogaon, who was always courteous to women, remarked :

“Since she wishes it, I will see her, but my decision is unalterable. I could never consent to your marriage with her. As I have already told you I would rather see you dead than united to such an accursed girl.”

“Why do you hate her so ? ” Tej Karan asked, trying to keep calm and looking into the old man’s eyes, in order to read his soul.

“I do not hate her,” Rhogaon replied, “I hate neither man nor woman. I do not wish you to wed her because she comes of a bad stock. I know for certain that she herself is bad.”

Tej Karan smiled incredulously.

“What proof can you give me, father,” he exclaimed, “that what you say is true ? ”

“Have I ever lied ? ” Rhogaon answered haughtily. “Tell me ! ”

Tej Karan, who had never known his benefactor to tell

an untruth, did not speak. Maroni's eyes and kisses, however, were still fresh in his mind, and rather than lose her, he determined to sacrifice everything and everyone, and, if needs be, go to Hell. Hence, without another word, he went out from his benefactor's presence, thinking only of Maroni and what they should do on the morrow. When the morrow arrived, Rhogaon set out to meet Maroni. Tej Karan followed him unperceived, and, just before the meeting took place, concealed himself close at hand.

"Be good enough to explain your object in bringing me here," Rhogaon began, folding his arms and gazing fixedly at Maroni with a stern look.

"I will," Maroni laughed. "I brought you here merely to tell you that I shall marry Tej Karan, in spite of all the lies you have told him about me. It makes no difference to him. He knows the reason of your hatred."

"Knows the reason!" Rhogaon exclaimed. "What reason?"

"Hypocrite," Maroni cried, raising her voice and advancing a step or two nearer to the astonished man, "Hypocrite, you know full well that not only did you try to seduce my mother, but not long ago you tried to seduce me, and it is because you failed, failed ignominiously in both instances, that you hate me and try to do me every injury in your power."

She looked so malicious in her wrath, there was such wild, ungovernable fury in her eyes, voice, and long, clenched fingers, that Rhogaon involuntarily shrank

back. But only for a moment. Roused by her false accusations to a fit of uncontrollable passion, he raised his clenched fist and smote at her.

Screaming at the top of her voice, "Help, help, he's murdering me," she sprang nimbly back and drew a glittering dagger from the sash round her waist. At the same time Tej Karan sprang out of the bushes and coming up behind his old benefactor, hurled him to the ground.

The next moment Maroni was bending over him, dagger in hand.

"Your time has come," she cried in a loud, mocking voice. "I have outwitted you. It is the Chief of Rhogaon who will die, not Maroni, and Maroni and Tej Karan will reign in your stead."

Then slowly, very slowly, she raised the glittering jewel-hilted dagger and, as slowly, pressed it down, pitilessly and relentlessly, deep into his heart. That done, she got rid of the blood on her hands and knife, and then, kissing Tej Karan fondly on the lips, said :

"Come now, we must get rid of the old fool's body."

Like one in a dream, Tej Karan helped her lift up the body of his old benefactor and friend, and between them they carried it and threw it headfirst down a deep well.

Tej Karan then took Maroni to his home and forthwith made her his wife.

Such is one version of the way in which Maroni the beautiful got herself established as joint ruler of the Rhogaon. Before many weeks had passed, however, she

proved to be so cruel and rapacious that the people declared that they would dethrone Tej Karan, unless he got rid of her. But Tej Karan, who was still madly in love, would not get rid of her, he kept his bride, and gave up his throne. Hence, he went down to posterity as the Dulka Rai or bridegroom king who, for a woman's kisses, gave up a throne.

To come to our next fatal kiss, we have to leap centuries, and in this interim, that is to say between the days of Tej Karan and the coming to the throne of Jagat Singh, the state of Jeypore underwent many vicissitudes. Wars devastated its territories and women worked havoc with the hearts and lives of its male subjects. At one time, we see Bhagwan Das celebrating, in a style quite unsurpassed in Jeypore, the marriage of the most beautiful of his daughters to handsome Prince Selem, son of Akbar the Magnificent ; at another time, a grim and horrible tragedy in which the victim was Jai Singh I., the famous warrior Rajah, who made even the great Aurangzeb jealous of his prowess and was assassinated by his own son, Kirat Singh, who committed the unnatural deed at the instigation of the woman who ruled his destiny ; and at another time, Isri, eldest son of Jai Singh II., the founder of what may be termed modern Jeypore, draining the poison cup, after the kingdom had been wrested from him by his half-brother, Madho Singh ; the woman in this instance being the mother of Madho, a Udaipun Princess, who hated Jai Singh II. and swore to bring about his downfall.

Jagat Singh, son of Pratap, to whom we now come, has the reputation of having been one of the most dissolute rulers that ever occupied the throne of Jeypore, and to a certain extent this may be true. He owed his shortcomings, however, in no small measure to his love of the beautiful. Lovely landscapes, lovely sunsets, lovely flowers, all made an irresistible appeal to him, but what won his admiration and enchanted him most of all were lovely women. Apropos of which, this story.

One day, as he was crossing a courtyard in the palace grounds of the Rajah of Udaipur, whom he happened to be visiting, his attention was arrested by an arm suddenly appearing through the folds of some magnificent crimson curtains drawn across a doorway in front of him. It was a woman's arm, slight yet beautifully moulded, and on it, enhancing its beauty, were many gold and silver bangles set with precious stones. The hand was small and slender, with long, tapering fingers and gleaming nails of an exquisite almond shape.

Enraptured at the sight of so lovely a hand and momentarily forgetful of the fact that he was a guest at the Palace, Jagat seized it and pressed it to his lips. The next moment he staggered back, pierced in the shoulder by a dagger that was really aimed at his heart.

Far from being cured of his infatuation for the hand, however, Jagat Singh now became all the more eager to behold the owner of it, and by bribing one of his host's attendants he finally discovered the lady was none other than the Maharajah's own daughter, Kishan Kumvari,

renowned throughout that part of India for her extraordinary beauty.

For some little escapade of which her parents did not altogether approve, Kishan Kumvari was living in strict seclusion just then, but on Jagat Singh pressing the Rajah to allow him to see her, the latter eventually yielded.

Jagat Singh was prepared to see a lovely woman, for all the accounts he had heard of her agreed in that respect, but when he did see her, he was dazzled. She was more beautiful than he had deemed it possible any woman on this earth could be. The hand, the beauty of which had so enslaved him, was merely in keeping with the rest of her; eyes, hair, nose, mouth, teeth, limbs, in fact every feature and every part of her, was simply exquisite, and all combined together formed a perfect and harmonious whole. Never in his wildest flights of nocturnal imagination—and in the still hours of the night he would often conjure up visions of feminine loveliness that could hardly be surpassed—had he seen anyone even a tithe so adorable or to compare, even ever so little, with her. And when she smiled at him, he felt he could prostrate himself at her dainty little feet and worship her for ever.

He bore no malice for the wound either she or one of her handmaidens had inflicted on him. Indeed, he would readily have given her his life, have let her, had she wished it, wound him again and again, until he was dead.

Madly in love with her the very instant he looked on her face, he resolved to marry her, cost him what it might. Had Jeypore been in a flourishing condition at the time, Kishan Kumvari's father would, in all probability, have been most agreeable to the match, but, unfortunately for Jagat Singh, it was not; for some time past it had been unable to repel the attacks of Jeswunt Rao Holkar, the notorious Mahratta chief, who periodically devastated part of the State, seizing towns and levying tolls, and this marauder was now joined by the two robber chiefs Ameer Khan and Bapooze Scindra, whose Pindari and Patan followers committed the most frightful atrocities.

Thus, surrounded on all sides by his victorious enemies, with hordes of them ready to march on Jeypore at any moment, his exchequer empty, his army, in consequence, ill-equipped and grumbling, and his civilian subjects in despair, Jagat Singh could yet find heart and time to fall in love.

He met Kishan Kumvari one evening by moonlight, fell at her feet, kissed them again and again, and swore he would drown himself in the nearest piece of water unless she consented to be his.

Kishan Kumvari, with her Jeypore lover lying at her feet, pondered; and as she did so, she toyed with her long black hair and jewelled ears. She was being courted by the Rajah of Jodhpore who appeared to be just as passionately in love with her as Jagat Singh. Moreover, his affairs were in a rather more satisfactory

condition. Still, Jagat Singh was the better looking of the two, he had finer eyes, clearer-cut features, he was taller, and his bearing was nobler, he was more like a Prince.

What should she do ? Refuse Jagat Singh ? No, she wasn't at all sure that she didn't like him the best. Ah ! she had thought of something. Why not test their love ! They should fight one another, and the winner, of course, she would wed. The idea was one that appealed to her with great force ; her nature being, as is the case with so many Orientals, full of latent cruelty.

In soft caressing terms, and still fondling her admirer, stroking his hair with her long, slim fingers, Kishan Kumvari explained her position. She had another lover, the Maharajah of Jodhpore. He also declared he worshipped her, and she could not make up her mind which she cared for most.

Now all the while she was speaking, she kept her dark, unfathomable eyes fixed on Jagat Singh, and being an expert in all matters relating to the heart, she saw at a glance that he had a very jealous disposition and that it could very easily be made to serve her purpose. Hence, she now made certain subtle allusions to his rival, and by so doing soon worked him up into a state bordering on frenzy.

"I hate that man," he suddenly burst out, "I hate him so much that I would like to cut him into a thousand pieces. Oh, if only I had the chance."

"But surely you don't hate him for loving me," Kishan Kumvari laughed. "He has as much right to love me as you have. Come, you profess to a great deal. I should like to test your devotion. Now, how can I do it?" And she knitted her pretty eyebrows as if in deep thought. "Ah! I have it," she went on, after a slight pause. "You both say you would do anything in this world for me. Supposing you fight one another, and I promise to marry the victor."

"You mean it?" Jagat Singh exclaimed, looking up eagerly into her face.

"I do," Kishan Kumvari gaily replied. "I have never been more in earnest. In proof of it, here is my pledge," and bending down her beautiful head, she kissed her lover, at first very gently on the forehead and then long and passionately on the lips.

The following day, the long-suffering and almost exhausted citizens of Jeypore were horrified to learn they had yet another enemy enrolled against them, for without the knowledge of any of his ministers, Jagat Singh had suddenly, for no apparent reason, but, as it afterwards transpired, all for love of Kishan Kumvari, declared war on Jodhpore.

With Jeypore now engaged in attacking Jodhpore, but very little opposition could be offered to Holkar and Scindra, who taking full advantage of the situation, raided and ravaged both States with impunity. Indeed, had it not been for Ameer Khan there is very little doubt but that both Jeypore and Jodhpore would soon

have been at their last gasp ; but it was not the Ameer's policy that this state of things should come to pass. Though periodically the ally of both Holkar and Scindra, he was at the same time, to a certain extent, their rival, and he had no desire to see either of them made more powerful by their annexation of another State. Consequently, he offered his services to both Jeypore and Jodhpore, in consideration, of course, of a very large tribute.

His services were accepted, and it was while he was fighting against the common foes of these two States that he saw Kishan Kumvari, and, no less than Jagat Singh and the Maharajah of Jodhpore, became infatuated with her.

However, Kishan Kumvari was by no means enamoured of him. Coming of ancient stock, and having all the pride of her forefathers and, perhaps, a little more, the mere thought of marrying a common robber, albeit a notoriously rich one, was repugnant to her, and when he knelt before her and asked her to be his bride, she spat at him and called him a foul dog of a Pindari.

Now, although Ameer Khan was about as big a cut-throat as it was possible to find in India, steeped in crime and vice of almost every kind, he was yet sufficiently an Oriental of those climes to object very strongly to being spat at, and when, in addition to that insult, he was called not merely a dog but a foul dog—which, indeed he was—his rage and indignation knew no bounds.

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Leaping to his feet in a paroxysm of demoniacal fury, he was about to plunge his dagger into Kishan Kumvari's much-agitated bosom, when second thoughts made him drop his weapon. He would pay her out in a manner that would be far more satisfactory. He would first lower her pride and then kill her.

Without a word he turned sullenly on his heel and left her. Some days later, the wild hordes of Holkar, Scindra and Ameer Khan lay before the Maharajah of Udaipur's capital in gleeful anticipation—waiting.

“There's only one chance for your city,” the Ameer said in a message to the Maharajah, “and that is your daughter Kishan Kumvari. You must give her to me or you and all your subjects perish.”

Being well enough acquainted with the Ameer to know that he would keep his word, the Maharajah trembled; so did his subjects. He might, perhaps, have obtained help from England; but the English at that time were at war with France, and, consequently, with their armies fully occupied in Europe, they would have been unable or at any rate unwilling to engage in any other campaign, especially a campaign against the Mahrattas and their allies, who happened to be in a very strong position. Appeal to Jeypore and Jodhpore was useless because both States were so crippled fighting one another, that they simply could not offer any help. Consequently, the Maharajah of Udaipur had no choice, he must either sacrifice his daughter or submit to the slaughter of himself and his citizens, and fear of rebel-

lion, as well as a wholesome regard for his own skin, made him choose the former.

Kishan Kumvari the beautiful was therefore handed over to the Ameer Khan. He treated her in precisely the same fashion as he had treated her father.

"Here is a poison cup," he said, pointing to a goblet containing some deadly Oriental liquid, "you will either drink its contents or be my mistress."

The experience he had had of women led him to believe that she would chose the latter alternative. She disappointed him. Raising the cup of poison to her lips she at once drained the contents and, without a word, died.

After seizing part of the territory of Udaipur in revenge for the trick, as he put it, Kishan Kumvari had played him, Ameer Khan proceeded to annihilate Jodhpore and Jeypore.

"The object of your contention and devotion being in Paradise," he wrote to their respective rulers, "it is only meet that you should soon join her there. It is impolite to keep ladies waiting."

But not for the first time in his career, perhaps not for the last, the wily Ameer Khan failed to make allowances for eventualities. Jagat Singh, infuriated beyond measure by the perfidy of the man who, not content with having stolen his beloved, was trying to take his kingdom from him too, pulled himself together, and making a desperate stand against his enemy, appealed to the British to help him. Fortunately for Jagat

Singh, the British being at that moment unembarrassed by financial straits at home were able to buy off Ameer Khan's Pathan followers, thus for the time being saving the situation. It is possible they would even have taken Jeypore permanently under their protection had not Jagat's ministers objected, and directly there was no longer any imminent fear of destruction at the hands of Ameer Khan, refused point blank to submit to English suzerainty. Thus Jeypore was once again left to her fate.

However, since Ameer Khan was left with a comparatively small army, the English having destroyed and bought off the greater part of it, he had to content himself with merely retaining the portion of Jagat Singh's territory that he had previously seized.

A few years later Jagat Singh died, prematurely old, having, it would seem, only by a miracle escaped losing both his life and his kingdom through the kisses of a woman.

We now come to the year 1835. Jai Singh III, Jagat's successor, is seated alone in a room in his Palace meditating. He is worried. Affairs are not running smoothly in Jeypore. To begin with, the coffers of the Exchequer. They are pretty well in the same condition as Jagat Singh left them—almost empty. Now bare coffers generally mean discontent, and this instance is no exception to the rule. Jai's people are everlastingly grumbling, so are Jai's Ministers, so is everyone in Jeypore.

But of all the people in his kingdom there are only two of whom Jai Singh III is afraid. They are Jota Ram, his slim minister, with the smiling, saturnine face, and Rupa, Jota Ram's mistress and adviser in all things.

Jai Singh is thinking of these two now as he sits by the open window and gazes wearily into the starlit sky. So occupied, indeed, is he with his thoughts that he does not see a slender, jewelled hand steal stealthily through the yellow curtains at his back and sprinkle some white powder in the glass of wine by his side. The movement is executed with almost incredible swiftness and so noiselessly that Jai Singh hears nothing.

Hardly, however, has the hand withdrawn, when he turns slowly round and reaching for the glass, raises it languidly to his lips and drains the contents. When one of his attendants comes into the room an hour or so later, Jai Singh III is lying back in his chair—silent, motionless, dead.

Jota Ram and Rupa are among the first to be told the news, and accompanied by one of the Court doctors they repair to the room in which the dead ruler lies.

"Well, my friend," Jota Ram says, addressing the doctor, "and what was the cause of death?"

Just for a moment their eyes met and though the glance exchanged was brief, very brief, it was long enough for its purpose; the two men understood one another. For the second time the doctor bends over the dead man, feels his heart, peers for a second or two into his face, and then, looking round, says :

“Gentlemen, His Highness died of heart disease. Unknown to anyone saving his Medical Advisers, he had been suffering from this malady for the past two years.”

Several of the Ministers who are present look at one another meaningly and then, without a word, file silently and noiselessly out of the royal death room, leaving Jota Ram and Rupa alone with the corpse.

“Fine,” Jota Ram exclaimed, after tiptoeing to the door and peering outside, to make sure that no one was listening. “Fine! You’ve played your part admirably, Rupa. Not counting the doctor, whom we can rely on to keep quiet, do you think anyone suspects?”

Rupa shrugged her shoulders.

“No matter if they do,” she said, picking up a hand mirror and applying some kohl to her eyebrows. “They have no proof. I took care that no one was about when I dropped the poison in his wine, and saw that there was none left in the glass to betray us.”

“There’s only Ram Singh between us and the throne now, Rupa,” Jota Ram said, taking one of her hands and toying affectionately with the long, delicate fingers. “Have you yet planned what we can do with regard to him?”

“Why, of course I have,” Rupa replied, leaning her dark head on her lover’s chest and wrinkling her pretty brow. “Listen! As you know, Ram Singh is always in charge of an ayah. In the daytime an old woman named Siva is with him, while from sunset to dawn he is

looked after by a young girl named Askava. I have sounded both these women, but they are devoted to Ram Singh, and I have assured myself that no amount of money will persuade them to harm him in any way. However, most opportunely for us, Askava has suddenly fallen ill and her place to-night will be taken by one of my maids, Narana, whom I am very generously loaning for the occasion. As soon as the sun rests on the horizon to-morrow Narana will go to the window of the royal nursery with Ram Singh in her arms and watch for my entry into the courtyard beneath. You will join me there. I will hold my hand to you, and the moment you raise it to your lips, Narana will drop Ram Singh out of the window with a piercing scream. No one suspects her of having designs on the child's life, and, consequently, his death will be deemed a pure accident."

"Rupa, you are a real genius," Jota Ram exclaimed, putting his arm round his mistress's slim waist and drawing her close to him. "No one but a genius could have devised such a scheme. If there are no hitches we shall soon be sole rulers of this kingdom. But Narana, of course, will expect a handsome reward."

"Leave that to me," Rupa smiled. "I am paying her well now, and I shall take very good care to ensure her silence later on."

"I think I understand," Jota Ram said, giving one of her ears a playful little pinch. "What a sly puss you are. I only hope you don't take it into your pretty head to treat me in the same fashion one day."

"Who knows," Rupa laughed. "At any rate you had better beware of offending me."

Had Jota Ram looked into her eyes, as she spoke these words, he would not have felt very happy with regard to the future, but her eyes were averted so that he did not see the gleam in them.

The sun was well on the horizon the following evening when Rupa passed along a narrow stone passage and emerged into a broad courtyard in the immediate precincts of the Rajah of Jeypore's palace. Her eyes eagerly sought the windows of the royal nursery and upon seeing Narana standing at one of them, with a tiny child clasped in her arms, she gave vent to a sigh of relief. The window being at a height of about thirty feet from the ground, which was stone-paved, anyone falling from it, feet downwards, would certainly be injured, perhaps fatally, and to Rupa, who stood there anxiously weighing the chances, it seemed impossible that any child, deliberately let to fall head downwards from such a height, could escape being killed.

As she had hoped and anticipated the courtyard at this hour was deserted. With the exception of great bats and winged insects that whirled around, skimming eternally past the trees and shrubs, there was no other sign of movement. Immediately overhead a sky of gradually paling blue, all around tall palms and other Oriental trees, still with an almost uncanny stillness, their shadows on the white stones at their feet momentarily darkening. Afar off, the occasional baying of dogs,

otherwise no distinctive sound, not even the whispering of wind, or rustling of foliage, only the continual hum and buzz of insects and the whizzing and fluttering of wings.

Then, suddenly, a door opened and with a slight, very slight rattle a man appeared in the fast-paling beams of the sun. It was Jota Ram. Approaching Rupa, she held out one of her hands, and as he raised it to his lips and kissed it, there was a sudden thud, followed by a piercing scream.

"Allah preserve us!" Rupa cried, her eyes full of a triumph she could ill suppress, "what's happened?"

"The child, the child," a voice from the window wailed. "He slipped out of my arms. I am undone. I have let him fall, he is killed."

As if by magic the courtyard filled. Men and women, courtiers and servants, soldiers and coolies, attracted by the shrieks came crowding in from all sides, wild with anxiety to know what had caused them. All made at once for the tiny figure lying huddled up and motionless in a pool of blood.

"Who is it?" "What has happened?" roared a hundred voices.

With a wave of her jewelled hand Rupa motioned them to be silent.

"There has been an accident," she said, making a superhuman effort to appear calm. "Your little Rajah has fallen from the window of his nursery and is killed."

“Are you sure it is the child,” a shrill voice from the crowd inquired. “Look and see.”

The tiny body was lying at her feet, face downwards. With the eyes of everyone in the great crowd watching her, Rupa bent down and slowly turned it over. Then she sprang back, as if someone had tried to stab her. By some hideous mishap, some strange bungling, her brain at the moment could not comprehend, the infant whose end she had so successfully wrought was not Ram Singh at all, but a complete stranger. Then, as she stood there, baffled and wondering, the same shrill voice cried out again :

“I am Siva, Siva, the chief ayah of the royal household. All you, who are assembled here, listen to me. Yesterday, at noon, Askava, who relieves me at evening-tide, was suddenly taken ill. Remembering our late Rajah’s death, I suspected poison and accordingly, when Narana, one of Rupa’s household, came to take Askava’s place, I substituted another child for our illustrious prince Ram Singh II. What has now happened confirms my suspicions. This so-called accident was no accident. It was all designed by that wicked woman Rupa ; and Narana, miserable creature, was her accomplice. Say now, am I not right ? ”

There was a loud shout of “Yes !” and an angry move in the direction of Rupa, who stood cowering against the palace wall. There is little doubt that she would have suffered death at the hands of the mob, had not the unexpected happened. Just as the foremost of

the throng were crowding in on her, their hands raised, ready to rend her into pieces, there was a cry 'The English! the English!' and the next moment a body of Sepoys in scarlet uniforms, with a white officer at their head, marched into the courtyard. The crowd sullenly fell back, and at a word from the officer in command, Rupa and Jota Ram were taken into custody. What had happened was this: The Ministers of the late Rajah of Jeypore being not quite so apathetic and witless as Rupa had deemed them, and fearful lest she and her paramour should seize the throne, had communicated with the British at Delhi and had eventually prevailed upon them to come to their aid. It was thus that Major Alves, appointed British Commissioner at Jeypore, arrived with his troops, just in time to save Jota Ram and Rupa from the punishment they so well merited at the hands of the mob.

Tried according to English law, Jota was placed under guard in a house in Jeypore, while Rupa was banished to Dersar, a town some thirty miles or so distant.

Shortly afterwards a rising took place in Jeypore against the British, and Major Alves, Mr. Blake, his assistant, and several other Europeans, were treacherously and cruelly murdered. The British, for once, dealt out summary justice. All who had taken an active part in the murders were instantly seized and executed; while Jota Ram and Rupa, who were believed to have been the instigators, were imprisoned for life.

Thus ended the drama of the courtyard kiss, fatal to an innocent child, since it was the signal chosen for its death, and almost equally fatal to the recipient and bestower, since, as far as they were concerned, nothing but misery and ruin followed in its wake.

CHAPTER VIII

THE KISS IN THE CRYSTAL

KENNETH, third Earl of Seaforth, had been in Paris several weeks, when his beautiful wife, weary of his absence—she hated solitude—and wondering why she had not heard from him for so long, gave a great banquet at Brahan Castle, then, as now, the principal seat of the Seaforth family in Scotland. Many were the guests invited to it, indeed, such a gathering of noble lords and ladies had not been seen in that part of Scotland for many a long year.

Now, living at that time on the estate of the Earl was a strange man, sometimes styled Coinneach Odhar, but more generally known to posterity as the Brahan Seer. He possessed a wonderful piece of crystal called the Clach Fhiosrachd, upon which he was popularly believed to see not only events happening at the moment in all parts of the world, but events that were yet to happen. Indeed, so widespread was his reputation for clairvoyancy and prophecy, that people came to consult him from all parts of Scotland, and it was rumoured that even King Charles II and some of

his lady loves had announced their intention of paying him a visit one day.

To be associated in any way with things supernatural was not without grave danger in those days, and the bigotted Church of Scotland had long had its eyes on the Brahan Seer, longing and waiting for an opportunity to get him into its clutches. The Church knew it had the sympathies of the Countess of Seaforth, who, for some reason or another, had never liked the Brahan Seer, but so long as the seer retained the friendship of the Earl, it dared not molest him. Such was the state of affairs when the Countess gave her far-famed and super-sumptuous banquet.

Now, it so happened that the Brahan Seer chanced to be passing by the Castle when the guests were arriving, and as he paused to watch the gay equipages pass through the lodge gates, one of the lodge-keeper's family, tapping him on the shoulder, said :

"There's wonderful doings, mon, at the Castle to-night. Never hae I seen sae many bonnie ladies and gallant gentlemen. They do say all the rank and fashion this side of the Cheviots will be there."

"The Deil tak them all," the Brahan Seer responded with an oath, "there's muckle mair beauty and dignity among the puir to my way of thinking than there is among the grand folk."

The Brahan Seer spoke in such loud, scoffing tones that the occupants of a coach that had drawn up at the lodge gates to allow another coach, coming from an

opposite direction, to pass through first, overheard him, and one of them, a Court dandy with pomaded curls and monocle complete, leaned out of the window and stared at him. He said nothing, however, and withdrew his head as the coach passed on.

"If ye tak my advice Coinneach," the lodge-keeper remarked, "ye'll nae speak sae loud in future or thy tongue will get ye into trouble."

"I dinna care," the Brahan Seer replied. "I hae nae liking for the grand folk I tell ye." He then tied up his shoe laces and hurried home.

The scene now shifts to the ball-room at Brahan Castle, where, the banquet over, the Countess and her guests were assembled.

"'Pon my honour," one middle-aged dandy observed, glancing round at the assemblage with an expression of the keenest approval. "I have never seen so many pretty faces in a room before, not even at Versailles or the Duchess of Grammont's reception last May."

"And our hostess outshines them all," a handsome young chevalier exclaimed, with unfeigned enthusiasm.

"Very prettily said," another young gallant, who was standing near, lisped. "Very prettily said, indeed. Moreover, it is undoubtedly true, and therefore it may surprise you to hear that your opinion is not shared by all. A few hours ago, some fellow, a strange-looking fellow certainly, perhaps he was mad, remarked in my hearing that a great deal more dignity and beauty existed among the peasants on this estate than among

those of our class, whom he scornfully termed the grand folk, who were assembling here to-night."

"'Sdeath," ejaculated the handsome young chevalier, "I should like to hear him express such an opinion in my presence. I would pink him on the spot, burn my soul if I wouldn't."

"What are you gentlemen talking so heatedly about?" a very pretty girl, exquisitely gowned, chimed in. "I'll wager it has something to do with women."

"You are quite right, Lady Hilda," the young chevalier replied. "Sir Marmaduke Trevelyan has just been telling us something he overheard a fellow on the estate say about the women here."

"How interesting," Lady Hilda Maxwell ejaculated. "Oh, do tell me what he said, Sir Marmaduke."

Thus pressed, Sir Marmaduke Trevelyan recounted again with sundry embellishments, what he overheard the Brahan Seer say. Highly indignant Lady Hilda repeated it to various other of the guests, and in due course it reached the ears of the Countess.

"Will you describe the fellow?" she said to Sir Marmaduke. "Maybe I know the man; he's probably one of the men employed at the Castle."

"Marry, but you couldn't mistake him if you'd once seen him," Sir Marmaduke replied. "I never saw such a queer-looking creature. He really quite frightened me, 'pon honour he did."

"Yes, but what was he like?" the Countess exclaimed impatiently. "Describe the man."

"Gramercy," Sir Marmaduke stuttered, "but that's not easy. If I were asked to say what he was like I should say most devilish dirty." And Sir Marmaduke giggled. "Long red hair half way down his back, a long red beard, half way down his chest, a sheepskin in lieu of a doublet or jerkin, and his own skin in lieu of breeches and hose. As ugly a looking knave as I have ever set eyes on, 'pon honour, Countess." And Sir Marmaduke giggled again.

"It was Coinneach Odhar," the Countess said angrily. "He must be punished for daring to allude to my guests in such a fashion."

"Isn't he the man they say can read the future?" a young girl, who had been listening very intently to the conversation, queried.

"Yes," the Countess rejoined. "He is called the Brahan Seer."

"A Seer! Oh, do get him here and make him see things for us," several of the company exclaimed in chorus.

"Zounds!" Sir Marmaduke tittered, "so long as he doesn't come too near me, or see into my past, I shan't care."

For a few moments the Countess of Seaforth stood with knitted brows as if lost in thought. Then, with a sudden smile, that lent a great charm to her almost perfect features, she said:

"A good idea. He shall be summoned to the Castle at once."

A few minutes later and two of her servants, mounted on horseback, were riding as if their very lives depended on it, across moor and dale, up hill and down hill to the miserable hovel, the home of Coinneach Odhar. It was in vain he remonstrated and begged to be allowed to rest in his bed. The Countess's servants had their orders and would take no nay, and threatening dire punishment if he didn't accompany them, they made him mount one of the horses and ride with them to the Castle.

All the servants as well as the Countess and her guests were in the ball-room awaiting his arrival, and never had the Countess looked more beautiful. She wore a gown of the richest satin, cut low after the fashion of the times, and furnished with a very long train, which was carried, when she walked, by two young pages. Her fair glossy hair fell in long ringlets on her snowy neck and shoulders. She wore long pearl drop earrings, while a necklace and pendant of large pearls was fastened round her neck. On both arms she wore a profusion of gold bracelets, some quite plain, others studded with diamonds, rubies, sapphires and various other precious stones; while her white, tapering fingers, the envy of most of the ladies who looked at them, were covered with rings of an almost incalculable value.

Though her features, as I have said, were not quite faultless, they were certainly very attractive, few women possessing finer eyes or a more lovely chin and mouth.

Those watching her, however, at the moment of the Brahan Seer's entrance into the room, saw her expression suddenly undergo a change, which gave her a new and unsuspected character and boded ill to Coinneach Odhar. The latter had to be dragged by main force into the ball-room, and if he had looked strange and uncouth when Sir Marmaduke Trevelyan first saw him, he looked infinitely more so now.

His face was smeared with blood, and his hair and beard matted with it (his captors had struck him in the face causing his nose to bleed freely), his sheepskin was all awry, and his legs were covered with mud. Those assembled in the great room had never seen a more sorry figure; some laughed, while others appeared shocked, and not a few held their noses and turned away their faces in disgust.

The Seer's captors loosened their hold of him, as they brought him to a stand-still in front of the Countess.

"Coinneach Odhar," she exclaimed, "I have had you brought here because I wish to test the powers which I am told you possess. You see visions of things that are happening at a distance in your Clach Fhiosrachd, do you not?"

"I see them at times, my lady," the Brahan Seer muttered, looking despairingly at the door, through which he would have given his very soul to escape.

"Then it is my will that you should see something for us to-night," her ladyship exclaimed. "First of all,

look in your Clach Fhiosrachd and tell me what your lord and master, the Earl of Seaforth, is doing at this moment."

Seeing that it was useless to refuse, the Brahan Seer slowly extracted his famous crystal from a pocket in his sheepskin and gazed steadily into it.

"Well," the Countess exclaimed, at last, impatiently, "do you see anything?"

"I do, my lady," the Brahan Seer replied. "Ye need hae no fear for your lord. He is weel, very weel indeed."

The Countess gave a sigh of relief.

"That is not enough," she said. "I want to know what he is actually doing at this moment."

The Brahan Seer was silent. The hand holding the crystal shook, while an expression of terror crept into his eyes.

"Speak, fool," the Countess cried angrily, "and answer my question. What is his Lordship doing?"

"I dinna ken," the Brahan Seer stammered.

"You see something," the Countess persisted. "What is it?"

"Be satisfied with what I hae told ye," the Brahan Seer implored. "His Lordship is weel, very weel and merry."

Among his more intimate men friends the earl was known to be something of a "dog," and at the word "merry" several of the guests nudged one another and smiled.

The Countess, on the other hand, coloured slightly and looked distinctly annoyed.

"I insist upon knowing where his Lordship is and what he is doing," she exclaimed. "If you do not tell me instantly, you will regret it. His Lordship is, of course, making preparations for his return home."

There was menace in her tones, and after moistening his lips with his tongue, the Brahan Seer, in a trembling voice, said :

"His Lordship is in a magnificent room, my Lady, and in such gay company that he is nae thinking of leaving for hame at the minnit."

"He is at some Court function, I suppose," the Countess remarked, making a great effort to appear calm. "Describe to me exactly what is taking place."

"Your Ladyship !"

"Do as I tell you," the Countess said, coldly, with a terrible expression in her eyes and mouth.

"Your Ladyship must not blame me, then," the Brahan Seer stammered, his pallor showing even through many layers of dirt. "As ye will ken that which will make ye unhappy I will tell ye the truth. His Lordship seems to hae little thought of ye or his children or his Hieland hame. I see him in a gay gilded room, gaudily decked out in velvet and silk, and cloth of gold, and on his knees is a bonnie lassie. His arm is round her wee waist, and her arms are round his neck fondling him. He raises one of her wee, dainty hands, all covered with shining rings, such as your Ladyship is wearing,

to his lips and kisses it, not once but many times. She laughs and bends her smiling face close to his."

"That will do," the Countess exclaimed, amid the most profound hush. "Coinneach Odhar, you have spoken evil of your betters; you have maligned the mighty of the land; you have defamed a great chief, your lord and master, in front of his visitors and vassals; you have, prior to your coming here to-night, spoken slightly, in a manner ill-becoming in one of your humble position in life, of my guests; by doing all this you have outraged my feelings, and, as a consequence, you shall suffer the most severe punishment I can inflict. You shall die the death."

Another silence, this time a terrible silence, followed her speech. The guests and servants alike were so awe-stricken that they scarcely dared look at one another, but stood mute and motionless, their eyes on the ground.

It was not so with the Brahan Seer. He flung himself at the Countess's feet, and with hands clasped convulsively together he implored her mercy.

"It was not my fault," he kept saying. "Did not your Ladyship make me tell ye all I saw in the stonc. I didna want to, I didna want to, but ye obleeged me. Mercy, mercy."

The Countess listened to his ravings quite unmoved, and those watching her were unable to detect the slightest trace of pity in her eyes or face. Stamping her foot impatiently on the floor, she signalled to the

two men who had fetched the Seer from his home, and bid them put him in one of the long-disused dungeons of the Castle. It was in vain he struggled and besought aid from those standing around. All were in such terror of the Countess that none dared say a word on his behalf, and buffeted first by one of the servants who had hold of him, and then by the other, he was dragged shrieking and groaning out of the ball-room.

Some say that late that night, when all the guests were sleeping and the Castle was wrapt in deepest silence, the old rack that had long lain idle in a lumber room was taken from its resting place and conveyed noiselessly and stealthily to the dungeon in which Coinneach Odhar lay shivering. Again were all his prayers and entreaties in vain. The Countess, who accompanied his jailers, was inexorable, and in obedience to her instructions the wretched Seer was strapped to the rack and tortured till he fainted.

When this happened, the Countess ordered his release and tripped noiselessly to bed—smiling.

Some days later, the Brahan Seer was dragged rudely from the dungeon by a number of armed men and made to walk barefooted all the way to Chanonry Point, a spot near Fortrose.

The Countess of Seaforth accompanied the procession in her coach, and whenever the Brahan Seer paused, she leaned her head out of the window and commanded his captors to prick him with their pikes. He finally arrived at the Point a mass of bleeding wounds. No respite,

however, was allowed him. Standing on the ground, close beside a fire, was an enormous cask, the inside of which was studded all over with long, sharp spikes. Getting out of her carriage, the Countess walked to this cask and after inspecting it closely, she conversed for some moments in a low tone with the two jailers who had previously tortured the Seer. Directly she ceased speaking to them, they beckoned to some of the soldiers who were guarding the Brahan Seer, and with their assistance a great iron pot was filled with tar and hung over the fire. As soon as the tar boiled, it was poured into the cask, and more tar heated. In this manner the cask was speedily filled.

The Brahan Seer did not realize at first that all these preparations were expressly for him ; when, however, it did at last dawn on him that he was about to be sacrificed in a manner almost too barbarous for the mind to conceive, he broke from his guards and flung himself on the ground at his persecutor's feet.

"Spare me, spare me," he cried, clutching the hem of her gown, "Oh, anything, anything but that. Let me but gang free and I'll promise never to offend ye again."

The Countess laughed.

"You'll never gang free," she mimicked. "You have dabbled so long in the black art that your friend the deil has got firm hold of you and will never let you go. Heaven is barred to miserable sinners like you."

She spurned the unfortunate Seer from her as she

spoke and ordered the executioners to seize him. He was then led, struggling and shrieking to the barrel, and the executioners were about to bind him hand and foot when he begged permission to say a few parting words. As, by an unwritten law, such a right was extended to all persons prior to their execution, the Countess, not deeming it advisable to refuse him, signalled to him to proceed.

Looking her straight in the face and speaking with what seemed to many of those present almost super-human strength, considering his deplorably weak bodily condition, he began thus :*

" I see into the far future and I read in it the doom of the race of my oppressor. The long-descended line of the Seaforths will, ere many generations have passed, end in extinction and sorrow. I see a Caberfae,** the last of his House, both deaf and dumb. He will be the father of four fair sons, all of whom he will follow to the tomb. He will be bowed with care and will die mourning, knowing that the honours of his line are to be extinguished for ever and that no Chief of the Mackenzies shall bear rule at Brahan or Kintoul. After lamenting over the last and most promising of his sons, he himself shall sink into the grave, and the remnant of his possessions shall be inherited by a white-hooded*** lassie from the East, and she is to kill her sister. As a sign

* See " The Prophecies of the Brahan Seer," by Alexander Mackenzie. The original prophecy was probably uttered in Gaelic but Mr. Mackenzie has rendered it in English.

** Chieftain.

*** " Coifed " according to some writers.

by which it may be known that these things are coming to pass, there shall be four great lairds in the days of the last deaf and dumb Seaforth—Gairloch, Chisholm, Grant and Raasay, of whom one shall be buck-toothed, another hare-lipped, another half-witted, and the fourth a stammerer. Chiefs distinguished by these marks shall be the allies and neighbours of the last of the Seaforths. When he looks round and sees them, he will know that his sons are doomed to death, that his broad lands shall pass away to the stranger, and that his race shall come to an end.”

When he had got so far, the Seer paused for a few moments. Then continuing, he shook his clenched hand at the Countess, who merely smiled, and said :

“ You, cruel woman, said just now I could nae go to Heaven. You are wrong. I will go to Heaven but you never will, and this will be a sign whereby ye can determine whether I speak the truth or not. After I am dead, a raven and a dove coming from opposite directions will meet, and for a second hover over my ashes, on which they will afterwards alight. If the raven be foremost, you, Countess, have spoken truly, but if it be the dove, then ye have lied. Ye have made up your mind to kill me in this cruel manner ? ”

“ I have,” the Countess nodded. “ You shall die inch by inch and suffer all the pain I can inflict on you.”

“ It’s extraordinary,” the Seer muttered, “ that one so fair to look at should hae nae heart at all.”

He then took the Clach Fhiosrachd and flung it far

over the heads of the onlookers, away on to the moor, and where it fell has remained a mystery to this day, although many searches have been made for it.

The Countess now signalled to the executioners to begin, and, despite his desperate struggles, the Brahan Seer was speedily bound hand and foot.

Amid a breathless silence he was then lifted up and inch by inch thrust, head downwards, into the seething tar, the Countess herself superintending the proceedings, so eager was she that her instructions should be carried out to the very letter. Seldom could man have suffered such exquisite agony, and never surely could a woman have derived keener satisfaction from her cruelty, than did the fair Countess.

The executioners had no sooner accomplished their grisly task, when everyone present was immeasurably thrilled at the sight of a raven and a dove hovering in the air immediately over the tar barrel in which the Brahan Seer's remains were still frizzling. After wheeling around for some minutes both birds descended, and the dove was the first to alight on the rim of the barrel. It was joined immediately afterwards by the raven. The spectators glanced at one another in awe-struck silence, and then at the Countess.

Though no longer smiling, she appeared in no way perturbed, but walking majestically through the crowd, she got into her coach and was driven rapidly home.

Some few minutes later the Earl of Seaforth reached the spot, panting and exhausted. On his arrival at

Brahan Castle early that morning he had been informed of what was about to take place, and anxious to save the poor Seer, he had set off at once on horseback to Chanonry Point ; and never had a Seaforth ridden more furiously. To his intense sorrow he was just too late. The kisses he had bestowed on the pretty French woman's hand had proved fatal.

* * * *

Francis Humberston Mackenzie, twenty-first Caberfae or chief of the Mackenzies, who was created a peer of Great Britain, in 1797, under the title of Lord Seaforth and Baron Mackenzie of Kintoul, had a severe attack of scarlet fever when he was a boy, which deprived him of hearing and for some time almost of speech, too. He had four sons and six daughters. One of his sons lived only a very little, while all the others preceded him to the grave. Owing partly to these bereavements and partly to financial straits, the result, perhaps, of his own extravagance and someone else's mismanagement of his affairs, the last years of his life were very sad, and he died a miserable, melancholy old man. There is no doubt, also, that the prophecy was fulfilled with regard to his neighbours. Sir Hector Mackenzie of Gairloch

History proves to us that women can be just as cruel as men. The Countess of Seaforth is by no means the only instance. We have Amestris, Parysatis, Taki, Fulvia, Messalina, Théroigne de Mericourt and scores of others.

According to my authority, Alexander Mackenzie, a large flat stone, now almost covered with sand, still indicates the spot where the tragedy, which shocked all Scotland, occurred. It lies a few yards East from the road leading from Fortrose to Fort George Ferry, at about 250 yards North-West from the Lighthouse.

Regarding the Seer's prophecy, Sir Bernard Burke (See " *Vicissitudes of Families* ") and other eminent authorities declare it came true, being verified in the following

was buck-toothed, Chisholm, hare-lipped, and Grant half-witted, while MacLeod of Raasay stammered.

In further fulfilment of the prophecy or curse, Lord Seaforth's titles became extinct on his death; the chieftainship of the Clan passing to Mackenzie of Allengrange, while the remnant of his estates went to his eldest daughter, Mary Elizabeth Frederica, who had just returned to Scotland from India, and who, by reason of the fact that she was still in mourning for her husband, Admiral Sir Samuel Hood, might be regarded as the "white-coifed" lassie from the East of the Prophecy. Also, to corroborate this identification, shortly after Lady Hood's return, she was one day driving with her sister into a neighbouring town, when the horse took fright and bolted, and the carriage overturning, the sister was killed.

Thus, it might be said, since the accident that resulted in her sister's death was probably due to Lady Hood's mishandling of the reins, yet another clause in the Prophecy was worked out.

And to conclude it. Lady Hood, after a while, married again, and the remnant of her father's estates consequently passing to another line, the prediction of the Brahan Seer was fulfilled *in toto*.

No curse is more fully corroborated than the above. It was regarded as proven and treated as such not only by Sir Walter Scott but also by Sir Humphrey Davy and Mr. Marriott. The former deals with it at length in one of his works, and the latter testifies that he heard the

prophecy quoted in the Highlands, at a time when Francis Humberston Mackenzie, Lord Seaforth and Baron Mackenzie of Kintoul, was living and still had two sons alive and in excellent health.

Hence, the curse and its working out must be set down as no mere fiction but an actual fact.

CHAPTER IX

GERLINDE

NO country is richer in legend and tradition than Germany, and no part of Germany richer in that respect than the Rhineland.

Much of the latter's legendary, which, indeed, is beautiful, is so interwoven with history that it is impossible to say at this remote date how much of it is fiction and how much actual truth. Of the numerous stories that may be placed in this category is one associated with the ruins of the Castle of Falkenburg and the noble house of Guntram. During the Crusades, when half the nobility of Europe were pouring out their life-blood on the hot plains of Phrygia, there lived at the magnificent Castle Falkenburg a Count of that name, who had an only child, Dietlinde. Being very beautiful and an heiress it was not at all surprising that Dietlinde was not only courted by all the noble youths in the neighbourhood but by many living at a distance, and when it was at last announced that she had made her choice, many a heart grew sorrowful, for out of them all she could, of course, only choose one. Count Guntram, the favoured one, was tall and handsome, and,

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moreover, possessed a pleasing personality, that made him very popular at the Court of the Elector and a great favourite wherever he went. Indeed, it was said of him and, in all probability, quite truly, that he was a man with many friends and no enemies. Being rich, too, he experienced no opposition from Dietlinde's relatives, but was received by them with any amount of esteem and affection. Indeed, contrary to the old saying that the course of true love never yet ran smooth, everything seemed to be going perfectly tranquilly with the betrothed or affianced pair, the day for their marriage had been fixed, and preparations for the occasion were well in advance, when the unexpected happened.

On the very eve of their wedding, when the Castle of Falkenburg was full of guests, eagerly anticipating the morrow's festivities, a message came from the Elector summoning Guntram to appear at Court without delay, and as a refusal would mean disgrace and, perhaps, death, Guntram was left with no alternative saving to obey. Consequently, the marriage had to be postponed. After taking a sad farewell of his loved one Guntram set off to Court and, on arriving there, was at once despatched on a diplomatic mission to the Duke of Burgundy. Success as usual accompanied him, and, his task completed, he set off on his return journey.

Riding hard, for he was longing to be with Dietlinde and to clasp her in his arms again, he had covered a considerable portion of the distance and was close to the Rhine, when somehow or another he lost the track and

thus got separated from his attendants. To make matters worse, night was coming on and he was in a territory totally unknown to him. He looked around in all directions for the sight of some human habitation but he could see none, only a wide expanse of moorland, showing, here and there, great boulders and pools of still gleaming waters. A more inhospitable and lonely landscape his eyes had seldom dwelt on.

At length, however, he espied a charcoal burner, a little hunchback man with an enormous head of grizzled hair and a beard reaching almost to his waist.

"Can you direct me to the nearest village?" he inquired.

"Yes, my lad," the hunchback replied, "it is Neenhaut, and there are two roads to it. The one I should recommend you to take is the longer of the two."

"Gott in Himmell," Guntram exclaimed angrily, "why the longer when my horse is weary with long travelling and I am saddle sick and hungry?"

"It is the safer, my lord," the hunchback said humbly, "the shorter road leads through a forest that has long borne an evil reputation."

"I'm not afraid of robbers," Guntram laughed, "I have seen too much fighting in the Holy Land for that."

"It's not robbers I'm alluding to," the hunchback exclaimed, crossing himself, "it's spirits. The forest is haunted, my lord."

"So much the better," Guntram laughed again, "for that will save me the bother of keeping an eye on my

wallet. No robber dare face a ghost. Tell me the way."

"My lord !"

"Come, don't hinder me," Guntram ejaculated petulantly, "the shorter route, quick."

Seeing that it was useless to try to dissuade the Count from taking the route through the forest the hunchback reluctantly obeyed. Guntram tossed him a coin and rode on. The sun had by this time sunk low on the horizon and the angry red splashes in its wake were fast changing to a pale pink. Already the moon was visible overhead, and the shadows of the lofty pines and great, gaunt boulders were momentarily darkening. For some time the route Guntram took led him through a level track of country, remarkable for nothing, perhaps, saving its bareness. When this terminated he found himself on the brink of a long and steep decline. Here the view was magnificent. Below him, stretching away for miles on either side, lay a thickly-wooded valley, and beyond it in the far, far distance the broad sinuous Rhine, glimmering gold in the evening sunlight.

Directly he began the descent, he was conscious of a change in the temperature. Hitherto the weather had seemed mild for the time of year, but the evening dews now fell chilly around him, and he had to draw his cloak tightly about his body to keep warm. The silence, too, had become impressive. Along the plateau he had just quitted, the wind had periodically moaned and sighed,

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making the long straggly grass rustle and the al-
leaves chase each other across the narrow bridle-
with a crisp crackling noise. All this had now ceased.
There was absolute stillness, and no sound broke on the
measureless solitude of the valley but the clatter of his
horse's hoofs, which rang out with unusual distinction
on the rocky road. Owing, perhaps, partly to this, and
partly to the effect produced on him by the dark wintry
clouds that had abruptly made their appearance in the
western sky, and the sombre colouring of the valley,
sad fancies now took possession of Guntram's mind and
filled him with vague forebodings, that, try how he
would, he could not dispel.

At length he reached the bottom of the decline and
found himself in such gloom that he was obliged to
advance very slowly, lest his steed, encountering some
obstacle, should fall. He was thus feeling his way
cautiously forward, when a sudden rift in the clouds
overhead left the moon uncovered and he was enabled
to see his surroundings.

He was right in the heart of a forest, composed of
unusually tall trees, whose branches gleamed a ghostly
white in the pale moonbeams. Here and there, inter-
sprersed between the living trees, were dead and decaying
trunks, twisted and contorted into forms well calculated
at this hour and in so lonely a situation to excite fear in
any mind that was, even in the least degree, imaginative.

Guntram was naturally fearless, his record in the East
was a testimony to that, but his heart gave more than

one unpleasant throb as his eyes, yielding to some strange, persistent influence, kept glancing apprehensively on either side of him. Some of the shadows he saw he could easily account for, they were undoubtedly due to the trees, but there were others again, black shadows of queer, sinister shape that puzzled and perturbed him, so much so, indeed, that he more than once crossed himself and closed his fingers convulsively on the handle of his long and trustworthy Damascus blade. Still, he rode on and had just reached a spot where four paths intersected, when a night bird, perched on some tree top close at hand, wailed ominously, and the next moment his horse shied so violently that he was almost unseated. Steadying himself with an effort and pacifying the brute he looked fearfully around to ascertain the cause of the animal's behaviour and espied, away on his right, some little distance off, many lights, obviously emanating from a building of considerable size. Overjoyed at this discovery he at once altered his course, and making direct for the lights, eventually found himself opposite a noble-looking castle, built entirely of white granite that glittered all over in the moonlight, as if encrusted with precious stones. Fascinated at the spectacle, Guntram dismounted and tethering his horse to a tree, approached the main entrance to the building and rapped on the ponderous, nail-studded door with his sword hilt.

A few minutes later and he was in the presence of the Baron Lukenstein, the owner of the castle.

The Baron, a sad-looking man of rather over middle

age, greeted him cordially. "I am delighted to see you, Count," he said. "I know you well by reputation. Pray be my guest for to-night and, indeed, for as many nights as you please for I am very lonely here now. Two years ago I lost my only child, and since then I have been living here quite alone, saving, of course, for my servants."

Guntram accepted this invitation with the greatest pleasure, and, after bathing in a bath of the clearest crystal water, sat down to dine with the Baron in the large hall of the castle, which looked very bright and cheerful—owing to the cold an enormous fire, composed of sweet-scented pine wood, was burning in the ingle—compared with the gloom of the forest outside. Very cheery, too, was the rich red wine, nearly a hundred years old, that the Baron hospitably pressed upon his guest, and Guntram, yielding to its influence, an influence that was enhanced by the warmth from the fire, and the venison and other good food he had eaten, it must be remembered that he had not broken his fast for many hours, speedily shook off his depression and became his old gay self. Indeed he was now so full of wit and humour, that the Baron actually laughed, laughed repeatedly and heartily, a thing he had not done for a very long while, in fact, not since the death of his wife, which had taken place over twenty years previously. When bedtime arrived, Guntram was shown to a handsomely-furnished apartment at the end of a long corridor.

Having said his prayers piously, he speedily disrobed and was gradually sinking into a deep sleep, his thoughts far away with Dietlinde, when something suddenly aroused him. He sat up instantly and was amazed to hear a low, sweet song, sung apparently by a woman, not very far away. There was something both in the song and in the singing of it so alluring that Guntram was immeasurably fascinated, and at last, yielding to an impulse, he got up and dressed, determined to discover the identity of the singer. He had not far to go to find her. He saw her through the half-open door of the apartment next to his ; she was the most beautiful girl he had ever looked on. Like so many Germans she was fair. Her long golden hair fell in ringlets about her neck and shoulders. Her nose and chin were exquisitely-proportioned, her lips daintily-moulded, her teeth like pearls, and her long, dreamy, dark-lashed eyes of a heavenly blue.

Nor did her attractions end there, for she was altogether beautifully-fashioned, her hands slim and white had tapering fingers and long almond-shaped nails, that gleamed like jewels every time the moonbeams fell on them ; and her feet were not a whit less dainty and fascinating.

In fact she was so wonderfully lovely that Guntram could only stand and stare at her in silent awe and astonishment. He had thought Dietlinde beautiful, and undoubtedly she was, but compared with this woman, she was as a star to the sun, or as a daisy to a

rose in full bloom. At length his curiosity got to such a pitch that he could resist it no longer and he implored her to tell him who she was ; but he received no reply. She continued singing. He then approached a little nearer, and a little nearer yet; till their eyes met. With an arch smile she pointed to a tablet on the wall by her side, and he read on it, engraved in great black letters :

“ Alone in silent solitude I pine,
Kiss me beloved and be forever mine.”

The arch look now faded, and an expression of such earnest entreaty stole into her eyes, that Guntram, already overcome by her beauty, succumbed, and seizing both her hands in his, he kissed them, first one and then the other, again and again. She made no resistance but gently drawing him towards a divan, she just as gently forced him to be seated, and then perched herself on his knee. Putting one soft white arm round his neck and raising her lips to his, she gazed laughingly in his eyes. This was the climax. In merry mood she was absolutely irresistible. Guntram, before he could realize what he was doing, had her in his arms kissing her. Kissing her madly, on eyes, and cheeks, and lips. Hour after hour passed thus in passionate love-making, till the grey of early dawn dissipated the dark shadows of the night and a clock from somewhere in the building sonorously sounded four.

“ I must go now,” the maiden said, giving Guntram a final kiss and stroking his head affectionately. “ Remem-

ber those words," and she pointed once again to the tablet on the wall. Then slipping something into his hand, she slid gently from his knees and left the apartment. The moment she had gone, Guntram looked at the article she had given him. It was a gold ring and engraved on it in precious stones were the words, "Thou art mine."

Conscious now of his faithlessness to Dietlinde he flung the ring from him, and returning to his apartment gave way to an outburst of bitter grief. When he came down to breakfast in the morning, the owner of the castle inquired how he had slept, and on receiving no reply, for Guntram did not know what to say, exclaimed, "I pray heaven that you were not disturbed by any singing." Still Guntram did not answer. His host then said, "I can see by your face, Count Guntram, that the worst has happened and that you have encountered the phantom that haunts this castle. Alas, it is the spirit of my daughter, Gerlinde. Listen and I will tell you the history of the haunting. I had one child, Gerlinde, who possessed of an almost unearthly beauty was just as wicked as she was fair. She took a fiendish delight in making the men who came to woo her from all over the country jealous of each other, to such extent that they would either kill their rival or kill themselves. She would also resort to all kinds of diabolical devices to test their devotion. A young knight from Sweden, at her bidding, jumped from the highest window of the castle, and, the result being the inevitable, was killed.

She egged on another knight to suicide by inciting him to swim across a whirlpool on the Rhine, and as she watched him from the bank being sucked under and drowned, she laughed, and when he sank so that she could no longer see him, she went home exultingly, to dress for a ball at a neighbouring castle. At last a Countess, the mother of one of Gerlinde's victims, came to the castle and asked to see her. Gerlinde, nothing loth, at once appeared before her visitor clad in one of her most expensive dresses. Full of indignation the Countess cursed her. 'Thou shalt die in three times nine days,' she exclaimed, 'and thy spirit shall be earthbound in this castle, always tempting men, even as you have tempted them during your lifetime. Those who succumb to your caresses shall perish in three times nine days, too. Nothing shall save them. Nor shalt thou cease to walk here till some young man rejects your advances and spurns you from him.'

"Having spoken thus the Countess turned on her heel and left the castle. Gerlinde only laughed. All the same, exactly twenty-seven days later, she met with a fatal accident. Ever since then her spirit, behaving in the same capricious and abandoned fashion, has haunted this castle, and all who caress her phantasm inevitably die in twenty-seven days. I would to God, young man, I had never seen you; I would have warned you, but something always prevents me from warning anyone."

The story ended, Guntram, in a terrible state of mind, without thanking his host for his hospitality or even

wishing him good-bye, set off at once to Falkenburg Castle, and on his arrival at once told Dietlinde what had happened and implored her pardon.

Being really very fond of Guntram, Dietlinde, convinced that he was genuinely sorry for having fallen a victim to the ghost maiden's wiles, readily forgave him, and, at his urgent request, agreed to marry him the following day. Hence, preparations for the ceremony were speedily set on foot and completed, and at the appointed hour guests and household assembled in the castle chapel.

Guntram had spent the night in prayer, and when the priest attached to the noble House of Falkenburg had said to him "Heaven has forgiven you and will protect you against all evil influences," he felt assured. The power of God was surely stronger than the power of Gerlinde. So it was with a smiling face and a heart full of confidence that he entered the chapel at the time fixed for his marriage and took his position by the side of his beautiful bride.

The words making them husband and wife had just been said and Guntram had slipped the marriage ring on Dietlinde's finger, when icy lips were suddenly pressed against his, and he heard a voice, that he recognised at once as Gerlinde's, whisper in his ear, very clearly and with great emphasis, the ominous words: "Remember, thou art mine."

The shock was so great that Guntram fainted. On his recovery he explained to Dietlinde what had hap-

pened, and at her suggestion once more sought the advice and consolation of the Church.

The priest, who was well acquainted with the story of Gerlinde, knew how almost hopeless it is to try to break through the working out of a fully justified curse. The haunting of Waldburg Castle, where Guntram had stayed that momentous night, was no ordinary haunting, it was a haunting under the influence of a curse that had obviously received Heaven's sanction, and any attempt to interfere with it would probably meet with God's disapproval; hence the great and, perhaps, insurmountable difficulty. But the priest was a very humane and sympathetic man, and seeing how terribly distressed both the bridegroom and his bride were, he did his level best to comfort them.

"As I told you before," he said to Guntram, "Heaven has already forgiven you for your conduct at Waldburg, and it will surely protect you now that you are truly repentant, from any danger to your soul."

He dared not say more. As the days wore on, however, and nothing unpleasant happened, Guntram's spirits rose, to such a degree that, on the 27th day after his encounter with Gerlinde, he was almost, if not quite, his old self again; and on the morning of that day he set off as usual to the chase, accompanied by Dietlinde, who dearly loved hunting the sly red fox and the great noble stag, and a few of his most trustworthy retainers.

Their quarry led them into a vast and wild forest, and they had just slain a stag, Dietlinde giving it the *coup*

de grâce with her hunting knife, as it lay panting on the ground, and were riding on again, when Guntram suddenly saw a hand laid on his. It was a white, slim hand, with long, tapering fingers and beautifully-shaped nails, and on one of the fingers was a gold ring with the words "Thou art mine" engraved on it in rubies.

As Guntram stared at it, too petrified with horror to utter a sound, it slowly moved and touched his horse. The moment it did so, the horse shied so violently that Guntram, superb rider though he was, was unseated, and on the animal bolting, he was dragged some considerable distance, with one foot caught in the stirrup. When he was at length released, he was found to be seriously injured, and he died some hours later in Dietlinde's arms.

CHAPTER X

THE KISS ON THE SCAFFOLD

IT was Fair Day at Lelant in the summer of 1820, and the main street of the quaint little village was crowded with people of all ages and both sexes, decked out in their Sunday best. Most of them were on their way to the Towans, where there was a merry-go-round, Punch and Judy show, a couple of clever, saucy clowns, a strong man who could bend an iron poker and lift heavy weights, a fat woman who must have weighed at least sixteen stone, and a boxer who dared anyone in Lelant to walk on to his platform and have a round with him.

There was nothing new in all this, many of the people in the village and neighbourhood had witnessed such sights scores of times before, but it came as a pleasant relief to long uninterrupted spells of hard work and the dull routine of home life. Among those wending their way to the shows was a tall, handsome woman with black hair, strongly-marked features, bold dark eyes, and even teeth, that flashed white every time the brilliant sunlight caught them. She wore a red dress, silver-buckled shoes and large gold gipsy earrings. She was

altogether a striking picture and would have been prepossessing but for a peculiar sinister something that showed itself occasionally in her expression and general appearance. As she pushed her way through the crowd, she stopped every now and again to exchange a few words of good-natured badinage with the men—it was observable that she had little to say to the women—and one of them laughingly offered her a rose.

“If my old man was to see thee do that,” she said, smelling the flower and handing it back to him, “there’d be a row. He’s terrible jealous. Gets more and more so every day.”

“Perhaps he has a cause, Sarah Polgrean,” the young man laughed. “How’s Yorkshire Jack?”

“Not seen anything of him lately,” Sarah said, “not since we were caught together that night. Lor’, how my old man did go on. And when Jack had cleared off and he’d got me all alone, what do you think he did?”

“I dunno,” the young man laughed. “What, Sarah?”

“Why,” Sarah said, in a low voice, her dark eyes gleaming furiously, “he tried to beat me.”

“Do you mean to say he struck thee?” the young man exclaimed. “That doddering old fogey, old enough to be thy father, try to wollop thee, Sarah. Nay, I can’t believe it,” and he laughed again.

An angry frown gathered on Sarah’s face.

“Not so much noise, John Rogers,” she said savagely,

“or we shall have the lot of them stopping to listen to us. It’s as true as I stand here he hit me, and I’d have hit him back and, perhaps, have killed him—for I’ve a temper I can tell thee when once I’m roused—only I thought the better of it.”

“He likes thee too well, Sarah,” John Rogers commented, “that’s why he takes on so when someone else makes love to thee.”

“Well, I don’t like him,” Sarah Polgrean exclaimed bitterly. “I’d as soon have married a cat or a toad. If he plagues me much more with his jealous looks and words, the old fool, I’ll be after buying two pennyworth of white sugar* for him and that will keep him quiet if nothing else does.”

“I don’t like to hear thee talk in that way, Sarah,” John Rogers said, solemnly, eyeing her at the same time curiously, “you look as if you meant it.”

“Aye, I do mean it,” Sarah retorted, speaking, as she always did when excited, in high, shrill tones, “I do mean it, John Rogers.”

“Well, I’m off,” John Rogers replied, “so ta-ta, Sarah. Maybe we shall meet again, on the Towans.”

Nodding his head a bit stiffly, so Sarah thought, he moved on, and was speedily lost to sight in the throng.

A minute or so later and Sarah was accosted by someone else. This time a tall, strongly-built man, of, perhaps, thirty-five or forty, with a broad, sunburnt, slightly pock-marked face, and curly fair hair. He

* *Vide Annual Register*, 1820.

touched Sarah on the elbow, and she swung round on him with characteristic impetuosity.

“Good God, Jack, is it thee?” she ejaculated, a frightened expression in her eyes. Then, in a whisper—“Don’t talk to me now. We may be seen. Meet me to-morrow night in our usual place, at eleven.”

“All right, Sally,” the man replied, “I couldn’t resist saying just a word. Thou art looking bonnier than ever.”

He took hold of one of her hands as he spoke and squeezed it. Then he, too, passed on with the throng and was speedily lost to view.

The following night the clock of Ludvgan church had just struck eleven, and the echoes of the final stroke were even yet reverberating on the still night air, when a tall man in a rough seaman’s pea jacket and sealskin cap pulled low over his eyes, brushed aside the brambles of a thick growth of bushes and stepped softly into the narrow, dusty lane that led sinuously to Penzance Town. The night was lovely, a great silvery moon shone resplendently in an absolutely cloudless sky, while a gentle breeze, very refreshing after the almost tropical heat of the day, brought with it the delicious odour of new-mown hay, sweet clover and golden honeysuckle. Everywhere was still, for most of the villagers had retired to rest long ago, and, saving for the occasional far-off

barking of a dog, the chirruping of grasshoppers and the plaintive wailing of a night bird, no sound came to disturb the general silence.

Having glanced repeatedly up and down the road, as if on the look-out for someone, Yorkshire Jack, to give him the name by which he was commonly known, commenced pacing to and fro, his hands in his pockets and his eyes bent fixedly on the ground. He kept this up for some time and then, leaving off abruptly, stamped angrily on the ground and swore.

"Damn thee, Sally Polgrean," he said aloud, "damn thee for keeping me waiting like this when I might have been away in Paul rabbiting, or catching trout in Newlyn river." He was about to add more, when his sharp ears caught the sound of footsteps, and he paused.

A few seconds later, and a woman shot into view, round an abrupt angle in the road. It was Sarah Polgrean.

"Is that you, Jack?" she cried, quickening her steps to a run and jingling her keys in her hand.

"Aye, it's me right enough," Jack growled. "What has kept thee so long, Sally? I've been waiting for thee, for well nigh half an hour."

"The old man, Jack," Sarah panted, coming up to him and putting her arms round his neck. "He ate too heavily at supper and couldn't sleep in consequence. It was well nigh eleven when he finally dozed off. I had to wait awhile to make sure he wasn't pretending."

"Is he that artful, Sally?" Jack inquired, kissing her

passionately on the lips. "What a pity it is he doesn't croak. He would have done fast enough, if I'd have caught him hitting thee that night. It makes my blood boil only to think of it—his daring to strike thee."

"Then you overheard what I said to John Rogers," Sarah said slowly.

"Couldn't help it," Jack replied, "you shouldn't talk so loud. However, so long as it was only me that heard you and no one else, there's no great harm done. The brute."

"Then you heard what I said about that powder, Jack?"

"Aye, Sally," Jack responded, taking some tobacco from his wallet and filling his pipe with it, "but you weren't in earnest."

"Wasn't I?" Sarah said. "I was, Jack. The old man worries me to death with his everlasting jealousy and ailments. If it isn't gout, it's the rheumatism, always something. It gets on my nerves, I can tell thee. Besides, I haven't forgotten that blow he gave me. I swore I'd have his blood for it, and I will."

"I love you all the better for talking like that. You little spitfire," Yorkshire Jack said, putting his arm round her waist, and drawing her close to him. "You'd marry me if he was out of the way, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, Jack," Sally said simply, "the very moment he was screwed in his coffin I'd fix the day."

"I imagine he must have a tidy bit put away somewhere," Jack said thoughtfully.

"Maybe," Sarah replied. "I only wish I could find it. He keeps me pretty short I can tell thee, Jack. I asked him for five shillings to go to the fair with yesterday and he gave me two. The old devil."

"Maybe, if we was married, Sally, we'd find that money," Jack said, after a slight pause, during which he puffed away vigorously at his pipe.

"What have you in mind, Jack?" Sally asked, looking at him quizzically with her big black eyes.

"Same as you, Sally," Jack laughed, and again there was a pause in the conversation.

A sudden gust of wind blowing in from the sea made the leaves on the trees around them rustle in a ghostly fashion, a dog on a neighbouring farm howled dismally, while an owl from somewhere close at hand gave a sudden ominous hoot. Otherwise silence, a silence that was only emphasized by these isolated sounds. Then Yorkshire Jack spoke again.

"Poison's safer than blows, Sally," he said, taking his pipe from his mouth and setting it on the fence by his side.

"I know that, Jack," Sally replied, toying with the hand that encircled her not unshapely waist.

"And it's easy to get, Sally," Jack remarked again, giving waist and fingers a squeeze, and leaning his head lovingly against hers. "You could say you wanted it for rats."

"He certainly deserves it," Sally said shortly. "I hate him."

"A few pinches in his tea or gruel," Jack observed, "and the trick would be done. He's been ailing for some time, hasn't he?"

"Aye," Sarah replied. "He told me only six months ago that Dr. Moyle said he mustn't over-exert himself, as his heart wasn't very strong. He's got asthma, too."

"Pity he ain't got a few other things, too, Bright's disease, or something of that sort," Yorkshire Jack grumbled. "Still, I reckon the heart trouble's good enough. They'll think he died of that."

"You're counting on me using that poison," Sarah laughed. "Maybe I will. I'd do anything to please thee, Jack, and to be thy wife. Come what may you'll marry me. Promise, Jack."

"You know full well I will, lass," Jack replied. "Come what will." And he sealed his promise with a kiss.

After that they remained together, folded in one another's arms, their lips in loving contact till the church clock struck one. Sally then slowly freed herself from his grasp and rising from the ground exclaimed:

"It's time I was going, Jack. If the old man should wake and find I'm not in the house, there'll be the very devil to pay. Is it a bargain, Jack?"

"Is what a bargain?" Yorkshire Jack asked, picking up and putting on his sealskin cap, that had fallen off during their love-making. "Is what a bargain?"

"Why," Sarah said slowly, "that if I keep my word

and get that poison—for the rats—you'll keep yours and marry me ? ”

“ Haven't I told thee so,” Yorkshire Jack laughed, “ and given thee a score of kisses for a pledge. What more do ye want ? ”

“ Just one more kiss,” Sarah Polgrean said softly. “ One more, Jack, and I'll believe thee,” and going up to him, she raised her lips lovingly to his.

A few minutes later, and she was hurrying home alone. The great starlit expanse overhead, so mysterious and infinite in its possibilities, the tall, solemn trees, the gently-flickering shadows, and above all, perhaps, the stillness, thrilled her, and the thrill she now experienced was one that she had never experienced before. This was no doubt due in some measure to her conversation with Yorkshire Jack, which had excited her imagination and conjured up strange ideas in her mind ; but there was, nevertheless, a something in the night that was new to her ; something either drawn to her from afar, from the darkest side of the Unknown, or actually generated by her own evil thoughts.

Murder, how often had she read in the papers of folks committing murders, and now she was contemplating committing one herself.

But he deserved it. He was a nuisance, a bother, always thinking himself ill and worrying her, always jealous, madly, foolishly jealous. And he had dared lay his hands on her ; he should suffer in consequence. She would be revenged, sweetly revenged. And she

chuckled at the bare idea of what she would make him suffer. Jack, yes, he would be hers, all hers by and by. How she loved him. Her mind still in this strain she rounded a bend in the lane and came in full view of home—his—that miserable old Polgrean's home and hers. Then her heart gave a great wild sickly throb—there was a glimmering light in one of the cottage windows. He was awake and—yes, the light moved—looking for her.

“My God!” she exclaimed aloud, “what shall I say, what shall I do?”

A glistening object by the roadside attracted her attention. It was a big stone with rough jagged edges, just the thing in case he tried to strike her. But no, if the devil in her was roused and she used that, she would kill him, and to kill him in such a tell-tale manner would spoil everything, it would stop her marrying Jack. She must calm herself now, whatever he tried to do, or did, and wait. Her heart still throbbing she walked quickly up to the cottage and noiselessly opening the door, stepped into the room beyond. Involuntarily she started back, with a half-suppressed scream, at the sight of a white, wrinkled face, and two angry bright eyes, overshadowed by shaggy red eyebrows, glaring at her menacingly. The owner of the face, a man, stood there in his nightshirt, holding a lighted candle in one hand and a stick in the other. He was about sixty years of age, thin and angular, with great bony hands, and big red knuckles, looking swollen and slimy.

It was said that when he opened his ugly lips he showed great, fang-like teeth, which projected so far from his shrivelled gums, that they appeared to be upon the point of dropping out ; and when, at times, he laughed, in a spiteful, apish fashion, he seemed to open his great jaws like a horse. He did not laugh now, however, but stood with his eyes immovably fixed upon the shrinking woman, who had thus unexpectedly come upon him.

Sarah was so completely thrown off her guard by the suddenness of the meeting, she had not thought of his being at the door to receive her, that for some moments she stood transfixed, as though the old man's stare had turned her into stone.

He seemed to notice this, and there flickered round his ugly mouth something like a leer of triumph.

"Well, Sally," he said, in a harsh, grating voice, "what frightens you so ? "

"Nothing frightens me," Sally answered, recovering to some extent the courage and composure that had just deserted her.

"Oh !" the man ejaculated.

"Nothing frightens me," Sally repeated, "only you standing there so silent like, like a blessed ghost, startled me a little at first, as—as it might have startled any—anybody."

"I didn't know there was anything so very horrible about me," Polgrean grinned.

Sally was about to retort with her accustomed

bluntness, but a slight movement of the hand holding the stick made her pause.

"Maybe there's nothing very horrible about you," she said, "but that candlelight makes your face appear very white and your hair very red."

"You ain't complimentary," Polgrean scowled. "Where have you been?"

At this abrupt question, Sarah started and involuntarily shrank back.

"The heat during the day has given me a headache," she said, "and I went out of doors to get a breath of air."

"Why not say two breaths, a hundred, a thousand, a million breaths," Polgrean ejaculated with a hideous grin, "for you've been out at least two hours. How muddy your dress is," and he looked down at the hem of her gown, "and," he added, applying his long bony fingers to it before Sarah was aware of his motive, and could interfere to prevent it, "how wet. Looks as if you'd been sitting down somewhere. There's a heavy dew to-night."

"I sat for a few minutes on the bank by the roadside," Sarah said.

"You lie," Polgrean thundered, his ugly face suddenly lighting up with passion. "You know you lie. You've been sitting out with that confounded lover of yours, Yorkshire Jack; but I'll be even with you—I'll," and he lifted his stick as he spoke. Sarah snatched it from his hand and threw it out of the window.

"No, you don't," she said, seizing him by the arm with such a grip that he winced. "You just stop that. Stop it or I'll make you sorry."

"And yourself, too, Sarah Polgrean," he whined. "I know you want to kill me. I've read it in your eyes for a long time past. I'm a hindrance to you and you want to get rid of me, so that you can marry that good-for-nothing Jack, a scoundrel that's never done an honest day's work in his life."

"Leave off," Sarah broke in savagely, shifting her grip to his neck and shaking him. "Leave off at once, do you hear? A word against Jack and I'll choke ye," and her long and by no means unshapely fingers worked convulsively, as if she was longing to carry out her threat.

Polgrean was cowed. Never very strong physically, he had long been crippled by gout and rheumatism and was no match for Sarah, who was nearly thirty years his junior and unusually powerful for a woman. She was terrible when roused. Realising all this, Polgrean now that he was disarmed, thought it discreet to give in, and allowed himself to be pushed unresistingly into his bedroom. Once there he sat disconsolately on the edge of the bedstead and thought—thought apprehensively. This for awhile, and then, without daring to call to Sarah, who had not followed him into the room but was somewhere outside, he blew out the candle and scrambled into bed.

Some days later, Sarah Polgrean, looking somewhat

flushed and excited, stopped at a butcher's stall in Penzance market and asked James Tonkin, the proprietor, if he could let her have some rat poison.

"Rat poison, Mrs. Polgrean," he exclaimed, "have you rats in your cottage?"

"Why, yes," she said. "We're over-run by them and Mrs. Harvey over at the drug shop won't sell me any. Says it's too dangerous."

"Well, it is dangerous," Mr. Tonkin observed. "There are rats in the cellars under my shop, but I don't like using poison lest it should get into the food. Still, if you want it badly, I'll step round to Mrs. Harvey with you and say a word to her."

"I wish you would, Mr. Tonkin," Sarah replied, favouring the susceptible butcher with a bright glance from her sparkling black eyes. "I'm terrified of rats."

Anxious to oblige her, for, apart from being handsome, she was a good customer, James Tonkin accompanied her to Mrs. Harvey's and she eventually, but not without some difficulty, obtained the rat poison—arsenic. That was on July 15th, on July 27th she again stopped in front of Tonkin's stall. This time she was all in black.

"Lost anyone?" Tonkin inquired sympathetically.

"Yes," she replied, "my husband, Henry. He was only ill three or four days."

"Good God!" Tonkin ejaculated, noting with surprise that she was wearing a gold bracelet and gold earrings. "Henry Polgrean gone, and so suddenly."

"Yes," Sarah remarked, "it was sudden. I buried him last week."

"I'm sorry for you," Tonkin observed, not quite knowing what other remark to make. "You'll miss him terribly."

"Yes, I do miss him," Sarah said. "Have you any steak, nice rump steak that will eat tender?"

"The rats must have been a token of his death," Tonkin remarked thoughtfully, as he picked up a knife and started slicing off a big chunk from a great piece of lean rump steak, that he had previously unhooked.

"Yes, I suppose they were," Sarah responded. "That looks juicy."

"Fresh in to-day," Tonkin replied. "What ailed him?"

"Heart," Sarah said laconically. "He had been suffering with it a long time. Give me some of those kidneys. Three will do. Are they fresh in, too?"

"This morning," Tonkin remarked. "Who attended him?"

"Richard Moyle," Sarah said. "How much? Half a crown! Meat's gone up, then?" And handing him the money she hurried off to the grocers.

A few weeks later, Sarah Polgrean appeared at the Cornwall Assizes arraigned on indictment for administering poison to her husband, Henry Polgrean, of which poison he died.

The evidence against her being conclusive, she was found guilty and sentenced to death. On the day prior

to the execution, which was fixed to take place at Bodmin, Sarah sent a message to the Governor of the Jail begging him to allow her lover, Yorkshire Jack, to accompany her to the scaffold. Strange to relate this request was granted,* and when, at the time appointed for the execution, Sarah Polgrean emerged from the prison, escorted by several warders and various other officials, she was joined by the man she loved.

Together they ascended the scaffold and stood for some moments in close and earnest confabulation. All preparations being complete, the executioner at length approached them, whereupon Sarah, gazing with strange intentness into her lover's eyes, said, "Jack, promise once more you will marry me." Wishing to humour her, Jack promised, and as he had done that night in the lane, sealed the promise with a kiss.

"Remember, Jack," she said, as the executioner gently separated them. "We will be married exactly seven years hence. I will come for you!"

Wiping his eyes, Jack then descended into the vast crowd that had gathered to witness the execution, and Sarah suffered the executioner to bind her arms. A few minutes later, and her lifeless body was pendulating in the air.

Those who saw Jack walking, or rather staggering home afterwards, said he looked then more like a corpse than a living person, and obviously from that day onwards he was a changed man. Gone was all his

* See "Popular Romances of the West of England," 1885, by Robert Hunt.

gaiety, and instead of being lively, a pleasant and companionable fellow, liked by most people, as formerly, he was now a sullen and morose one, shunning rather than seeking society. But it was not this change in him that surprised people. What they thought so remarkable about him was that he had a habit now of looking back over his shoulder with a startled expression, as if he expected to see someone standing by him, or, if he happened to be walking, following him. It was particularly noticeable in the evening, when it was growing dusk, and while some attributed this behaviour to a guilty conscience, maintaining that although he had not actually administered the poison to Henry Polgrean, he was at least a party to the crime and had probably been the instigator of it, other people were of the opinion that his altered character and demeanour were actually due to what had transpired during his last interview with Sarah Polgrean on the scaffold. He had then, they said, pledged himself to marry her, sealing his promise with a kiss, and he was in constant dread, lest her miserable earthbound spirit should hold him to his word.

However, be the cause of all this alteration in him what it might, he could not settle down to work on land again, but eventually went to sea as a hired hand.

The change seemed to do him good; he gradually became more cheerful and sociable and no longer looked behind him, as if in deadly fear of seeing someone or something at his heels. Thus, several years passed, and

all went well with him, till the seventh anniversary of the execution of Sarah Polgrean at length arrived.

“If I can tide over this day,” he remarked to the first mate of the ship he was serving, and who, hailing from Penzance, knew his story, “I shall be all right, but I dreamed last night Sally came to my hammock and whispered in my ear, ‘Jack, darling, I shan’t let thee forget thy promise.’”

“Take no notice of it,” the mate replied, “dreams are all rubbish.”

“I wish I could think so,” Yorkshire Jack said, “but somehow I can’t.”

Eleven thirty that night found Jack at his post on deck. The ship was nearing the Lizard, and the weather was stormy; overhead black clouds scudding at a great rate constantly obscured the moon, while all around waves, that in the uncertain light looked mountainous, rose and fell in never-ending succession. As already stated, Jack was on duty. He was on deck, when a tremendous wave suddenly bore down on the vessel and sweeping right over her bows washed him overboard. The moon at that moment suddenly appeared through a rift in the clouds, and those scanning the sea in search of Jack saw on one side the vessel, just above the surface of the heaving, tossing water, a strange black haze or cloud. As they stared at it in wonder, puzzled to know what it could be, it slowly evaporated, and in its place they saw three figures, rendered startlingly distinct by the gruesome bluish-white light they emitted

from all over them. They instantly recognized one of the figures as Yorkshire Jack. A tall dark woman, handsome, but in a singularly sinister way held him by the arm and was looking into his face with a smile of triumph, whilst the third figure stood beside these two, and was strange and terrible to behold. It was something like a man and yet not a man; and something like a wolf and yet not a wolf, but a grotesque mixture of both. Appalled by this sight, Jack's mates started back in dismay, and as they did so, they heard in the far distance, and coming seemingly from deep down below the waves, the merry joyous peal of wedding bells. When they looked again, all three figures had vanished and they asked each other, "Was the third the spirit of Henry Polgrean, or the Devil?"

CHAPTER XI

MARIE TARNOWSKA

AMONG the many Irishmen of gentle birth who, having left their native country in the early part of the eighteenth century, settled on the Continent, was one, O'Rourke, but whether this O'Rourke was of the House of Brefni* or not, I have been unable to ascertain. Selecting Russia for his goal he migrated thither and entered one or other of the Services.

In course of time his descendants adopted the Russianized name of O'Rurik, and the family, having lost practically all the distinguishing traits of the Irish Celt, were represented nearly two centuries later by Count O'Rurik, who, tall, splendidly upright and dignified, was typical in every respect of the Russian nobility of the pre-war period. His country seat was in Otrada, and it was there that Marie Nikolayevna, his beautiful daughter and the subject of this chapter, spent her early years.

As the result of a bad attack of measles, when only eight, she was obliged to wear spectacles, and would not

* The author of this work numbers a member of this illustrious and ancient house among his ancestry.

seem to have been a particularly attractive child, till she reached her teens and was able to discard glasses. She then speedily developed into a girl of the most extraordinary beauty, possessing physical charms that especially appealed to members of the opposite sex. She had a straight nose of medium size and in admirable proportion to the rest of the face, a lovely mouth, and long, heavily-lashed eyes that looked sometimes blue and at other times green. Her hair was curly, red-gold, and so long that it reached almost to her waist—a great beauty in those days. Her hands were exquisite—I describe them as they were described to me—slender and white, with tapering fingers and almond-shaped nails, which, when she left home and plunged into the vortex of town life, she invariably kept beautifully manicured.

Fond of her parents and greatly beloved by them in return, she appears to have spent an exceedingly happy childhood, romping about the garden and grounds of her home with her frolicsome sister Olga, and she knew little, if anything, of care or sorrow, until she had reached the age of seventeen.

She then fell in love with Vassili Tarnowska at first sight. His voice thrilled her. There was, however, a serious obstacle in the way of their marriage; her father wished her to marry Prince Ivan Troubetzkoi, who was in every respect a more desirable match. In order to thwart her father and gain her own ends Marie resorted to trickery. She feigned illness, and in a pre-

tended fit of convulsions, so frightened her doting mother, that the latter, sooner than see her in another such fit, connived at her elopement with Tarnowska. Thus helped, Marie and Tarnowska were married secretly at Kharkoff, and, according to Marie, her troubles began soon after.

In a confession, made many years later when she was in prison, she accuses Vassili of neglecting and ill-treating her ; and to his ill-usage of her she attributes all her subsequent crimes and intrigues ; but there is little doubt that she herself was greatly to blame. A girl who could deceive her parents as cleverly as she had done, was assuredly well able to cope with a husband, who at the worst would seem to have been merely somewhat gay and given to flirting with and flattering his lady friends. He was undoubtedly proud of his wife, otherwise why should he have been so madly jealous of her ? No, in blacking his character and trying to make herself appear a martyr,* Marie was simply following the example of many other criminals, particularly those of the most infamous and depraved kind, who rarely, if ever, acknowledge themselves in the wrong. If her husband did introduce her, as she complains that he did, to a life of pleasure and abandonment, she certainly showed no aversion—but, on the contrary, took to it with quite extraordinary avidity.

And now comes the first tragedy for which Marie Tarnowska was undoubtedly responsible.

* " Marie Tarnowska " by A. Vivanti Chartres, published 1915, William Heinemann.

Although she had not long made her appearance in Kharkoff society, she had already become well steeped in its dissipations, when Peter Tarnowska, her brother-in-law, a pale-faced, mild-mannered youth, somewhat addicted to absinthe and late hours, perhaps, but still simple and transparent, surprised her one day in the act of weeping. He asked her the cause of her distress, and she informed him it was Vassili.

“But I thought my brother was so devoted to you,” Peter said, or words to that effect.

“He was at one time,” Marie replied, “but, alas, he is tired of me. He spends all his time with other women.”

“You don’t mean that,” Peter exclaimed, “I can hardly believe such a thing possible, and you so good and beautiful!”

“It is so,” Marie sighed, looking up at Peter from under her long, dark lashes, “I am no longer the object of his love, Peter.”

Marie had known Peter from his childhood. He had loved her then, and now, as she gazed at him, her thoughts, for the time being at any rate, with Vassili, she determined to make him love her again, not with the innocent love of a child, but with all the mad, unbridled love of a man. It was thus that she would make Vassili jealous. Not that she any longer cared for Vassili; since she had seen so many other men, men of all types, some far handsomer and more fascinating than Vassili, her affection for him had waned. She may, of course, have fancied that his love for her had cooled;

and she would hate to think that others, besides herself, might have noticed it and would make pitying or scornful remarks about her. She had awakened to the power of her beauty and it pleased her that all men, including her husband, should be cognizant of it, too. She would make him submissive and bring him back to her, through apprehension, apprehension of her fascination for other men, and in Peter she saw an opportunity. He was a youth, it is true, but it affords some women intense satisfaction to have a mere lad in love with them, it gives them the keenest pleasure to hear their friends say : “ Do you know that so and so is in love with you ? Of course you can’t care for him, but anyone can see with half an eye, that he is devoted to you—devoted with all his heart and soul, poor boy ! ”

Women probably find it flattering, too, because they know that boys, as a rule, are great connoisseurs of the physical ; they adore beauty and very seldom, indeed, take notice of any woman who is not beautiful.

Yes, Marie argued, Peter would do, at any rate as a beginning. It was really very easy, for this subtle, worldly woman, this woman with the beauty and brains of a Cleopatra or Madam Brinvilliers, but whose innate wickedness and love of conquest probably outstripped both, to captivate Peter, who was even yet a child at heart, as most youths brought up in healthy surroundings are. A few more tears, a few more glances from her beautiful, soul-inspiring eyes, and we can see him at her feet, pouring out his

love and kissing her glistening finger-tips, again, and again, and again.

What followed we can only surmise, for Mura, to give Marie Tarnowska the name by which she was generally known among her friends, is singularly reticent on that point, both in her prison-spoken reminiscences and confessions. I think we may safely infer, however, that Peter staggered out of her presence drunk—drunk with the memory of her kisses, drunk with emotion, for being but a boy the confidences and kisses of this beautiful woman must have dazed and bewildered him. I repeat he must have been intoxicated, which was just what Mura had anticipated and desired.

On arriving at his old home near Kieff, however, the bout of passion wore off, and he became once again sober, painfully sober. Realization of his disloyal conduct to Vassili and of the hopelessness of his love for Mura came swiftly home to him. Remorse and despair took the place of elation, and retiring to a remote spot he hanged himself.

If Mura felt any pang of pity or regret, she certainly did not show it. On the contrary she took the news of his death with the utmost sang-froid. Possibly she had counted on it; indeed, I think there is little doubt but that she had inwardly hoped he would do away with himself, it would create a glamour round her, and Vassili, at any rate, would be impressed. Vassili, however, either through some knowledge that he had gleaned of his brother's disloyalty towards him, or an

instinctive knowledge of Mura's real character, or a combination of both, accused Mura of being instrumental in his brother's death, and she denied it. Yet, if the desire is father to the deed, there is little doubt she was guilty. Her subsequent behaviour strongly supports that supposition. According to her own statement she went to the funeral, but directly it was over and she was back again among the old set at Kharkoff, she resumed her previous occupation—dressing beautifully, striving for homage, and winning men's admiration and—hearts. That she succeeded only too well was apparent, for a second tragedy quickly followed the first.

Either at a ball, or some other gay function Mura was introduced to Alexis Bozevsky, a tall, fair, handsome officer of the Imperial Guard. She conceived an infatuation for him at once—she was, I submit, incapable of conceiving love, in spite of what her chroniclers and other feministic writers would have us believe—and forthwith set to work to enslave him, as she had enslaved her former victim. He succumbed immediately, and his passion for her soon became one of the latest scandals of the Kharkoff fast set. It was not long, of course, before Vassili got to hear of his wife's outrageous conduct, her exclusive dancing with Bozevsky, their *tête à tête* dinners at hotels and restaurants, and their clandestine meetings in Public Parks, or country lanes; some spy in his pay, perhaps, or some well-meaning busy-body kept him duly informed. Consequently, he had violent scenes with his wife, which usually terminated

in her tearful promise to reform. Of course she did not keep that promise—she never meant to—Vassili was jealous, terribly jealous, and that was what she had intended, what she had desired.

Then came the finale, at least the finale of that affair. Mura gradually grew tired of Bozevsky. Other handsome men appeared on her horizon, and she thirsted for further conquests. But how was she to get rid of him? He was so persistent, so constantly at her heels, haunting her in fact wherever she went. He was an absolute bore and a nuisance. All bores are nuisances. Then she hit upon a plan, so ingenuous that she laughed, laughed even months afterwards, when she thought of it. She invited Bozevsky to dine with her one night at the Grand Hotel, and sent an anonymous letter to her husband informing him of the fact. Vassili read it with murder in his heart, and loading a revolver, set off at once to the place named. Bursting into the room, he discovered Mura kissing Bozevsky passionately, and maddened at the sight—as Mura had known that he would be—he drew his revolver and shot Bozevsky through the neck. Some say there was a scene first, but I am inclined to think that the shot was fired the moment Vassili entered the room and witnessed the kiss. At any rate, the moment it was done, Mura denounced Vassili to the Police. She had determined to get rid of both husband and lover at the same time. By pure bad luck, however, she failed. The shot she had hoped would kill Bozevsky then and there did not prove fatal for three months, and

Vassili Tarnowska was acquitted on the grounds that the act of homicide was quite justifiable. So Mura was both balked and disappointed. At the same time she derived no little comfort from the fact that out of this same disappointment another love conquest and tragedy arose.

Dr. Stahl, who attended Alexis Bozevsky, fell in love with her, and she tormented him to such an extent with her eyes, that eventually, on being told by her that his case was hopeless, utterly hopeless, like poor Peter, he committed suicide. So far as I can ascertain she did not actually witness Dr. Stahl's death, but she did witness Bozevsky's, and as he lay dying, sat in an armchair watching him with a grim smile of satisfaction. He had sent her a note begging her to come and kiss him for the last time, kiss him good-bye. Her compliance with his request will strike one, perhaps, as odd. She had it is true once entertained an infatuation for this handsome lover, maybe as near to love as any infatuation she ever had, but it had not prevented her seeking his destruction, and one might have thought that as she no longer had any interest in the man and was not in the least degree ashamed of her conduct, or sorry for him, she would not have sought his company again. She acceded to his request, however, and went, not because it gave her any special pleasure to gloat over his actual physical sufferings—to do her some credit she does not appear to have been a sadist, that type of pervert who derives real pleasure from merely witnessing pain—but simply

to feed her vanity. It gave her supreme satisfaction to look at the dying man and say to herself, "And he endures all this on my account." That is what made her smile. In her subsequent statements in prison she attributes that smile to drugs, but drugs were not responsible for her treatment of Peter Tarnowska, there is nothing to show she was addicted to them at that time, nor is it at all likely that they prompted her to plot the simultaneous destruction of both her husband and Bozevsky. In reality, it was the wicked workings of her mind, she was born wicked, just as some, a certain few, are undoubtedly born good.

I think Mura was undoubtedly a Feminist. She had all the feminist love of the limelight, and of conquest, conquest of man. The true feminist hates men; that hatred of them is born in her, and although it may be latent for a time, it inevitably shows itself in course of time. The question will be asked, of course, how could a woman who was always having intrigues with men, such intrigues as Mura Tarnowska had, hate them. And my reply is, because in the end she was invariably instrumental in their destruction, either directly or indirectly she wrought that destruction, and it always brought her satisfaction. Can anyone be pleased at the death of a person, unless one at heart really detests that person. Although Mura was infatuated first of all with Vassili, whom she married, and then with her lover Bozevsky, and even those with whom she was not infatuated, namely, Peter Tarnowska and Dr. Stahl, she

would seem to have outwardly tolerated, since their respective deaths brought her no pang of pity, she could have had no affection for them. On the contrary, her feelings towards them were those of dormant dislike, and dormant dislike, as everyone knows, may develop at any moment into actual hatred. In her prison statements she confesses to a fondness for Peter when he was a child, but her criticisms of him as a youth, when his head was entirely turned with his mad infatuation for herself, belied these statements and prove that she could never have cared for him at all.

She certainly never cared for her father. Deep down at heart, then, I maintain not only that she never really cared for any man, but that she positively hated them. She sought their company mainly to extract homage from them, to feed her miserable vanity. And when she was satiated with one man's praises, she connived at his destruction.

The Feminist hates men because she regards them as her rivals, Mura hated men directly she grew tired of them, and they had served her purpose. In the case of the former envy is at the root of the abhorrence, in the case of the latter it was generally sheer boredom, boredom born, however, of vanity. In reality, whereas there is nothing feminine in the Feminist, Mura Tarnowska was a rare and queer medley of the Feminist and the Feminine, but in what proportion it is difficult to determine.

After the Bozevsky affair, Vassili Tarnowska naturally

sought a divorce, and it was during the legal proceedings he was taking to obtain it, that Mura became acquainted with Donat Prilukoff, a Russian Solicitor with an extensive practice, who was acting for her in the case.

He was thirty-seven years of age, married—hitherto happily—and with one child, a charming boy of thirteen. Yet, he succumbed. His client's appealing glances, the sight of her long, slim fingers playing nervously with her gloves or entwined together sorrowfully, oh, so sorrowfully, and over and above all her beautifully-modelled lips raised so enticingly to his, proved in the end irresistible. Thoughts of wife, and home, and honour, all vanished in thin air, and he kissed those red lips raised to his, greedily, hungrily, with all his heart and soul. It happened in his office, with the murky, grimy atmosphere of a city street outside. They stayed there late, that is to say till the hooting of motors and other sounds that are more or less continuous in the day-time in all busy towns were heard only at intervals, till the sunlight died away, and the pale moonbeams gradually stole into its place, till, in other words, daylight vanished and night with all the glamour of its star-spangled sky reigned in its stead. Then and not till then did these two kiss one another adieu and, separating, hasten to their respective homes.

It was not long before everyone knew that Mura Tarnowska was Prilukoff's mistress, and, as a consequence, his wife divorced him. Prilukoff then, goaded on by Mura, who was wildly extravagant, plunged head

over ears into debt, and in order to buy her jewellery and clothes, embezzled a large sum of money. To escape arrest he was obliged to flee the country. Mura accompanied him, but not before she had found a new lover in Prince Naumoff, a man of very ancient lineage and, like Prilukoff, married. Thus while Prilukoff, racked with anxiety, was making arrangements for their flight, Mura was holding clandestine meetings with Naumoff, resorting to all her old trickery of eyes, hands, and mouth, and with the same telling effect. Naumoff fell and became hopelessly enamoured. Then she set out with Prilukoff for Berlin, but on some plausible pretext left him at Vienna and returning to Russia, joined Naumoff. Soon finding out, however, that Naumoff was unable to provide her with sufficient money for all her extravagancies, she began an intrigue with a friend of his, Count Kamarowsky, who was reputed wealthy ; and when Naumoff complained of the Count's attentions to her, she declared there was nothing in them and that it was he, Naumoff, whom she loved and meant to marry.

Events now began to move fast. Prilukoff, getting to hear that Mura was carrying on with someone at Berlin, (for some non-apparent reason, he had gone there with Naumoff, Kamarowsky following them) at once set out in search of her. Finding her, and also finding that what he had heard about her was true, he upbraided her to such an extent and so effectively, that she flung £4,000, the sum he had embezzled for her sake, at his feet, exclaiming as she did so :

“There, take your filthy money and hand it back to the people you have robbed. I only hope they will send you to Siberia.”*

Prilukoff immediately picked up the money and swearing that he would never see her again, left her. This, it seems, was not quite what Mura had expected. Anyhow, she determined to get back the money she had so foolishly flung at him, and accordingly wrote to him, declaring that he was the only man she had ever cared for, and begging him to join her at once. She wrote with such apparent sincerity that Prilukoff was deceived. All his old love returned, and he tore back to her. She had won. A few kisses, a few caresses, and the £4,000 had changed hands again. The moment it was hers, she left Prilukoff and hurried off to Venice, where Count Kamarowsky was staying. Anxious to get his money as soon as possible, she goaded him on in his love-making, and again made so much use of her eyes, and lips, and hands that her victim was speedily demented with passion. Discretion was then thrown to the winds, and the Countess discovering them together, in such circumstances as left no doubt whatever as to their guilt, divorce proceedings began. Before the action concluded, however, the Countess died. She actually succumbed to the shock of it, the shock occasioned by all that she had seen and heard in connection with it. The Count offered Mura his hand in marriage and she accepted, conditionally, that he insured his life in her

* Or words to that effect.

favour for something like £20,000. At first he demurred, but her kisses were all in all to him, and soon, very soon, he gave in.

A lawyer had to be found, of course, who would carry out the necessary arrangements, and for this contingency Mura was well prepared. Discovering Prilukoff's whereabouts she went to him. White with anger he refused to listen to her. She seized his hands and resorted once again to all her old devices. For some minutes her success was in the balance. At last Prilukoff wavered, she persisted, and in the end he yielded.

"As soon as you have got the old dotard to sign the necessary documents," she said, "you must kill him."

"Kill him," Prilukoff gasped. "You are joking."

"No I'm not," Mura said, "you *must* kill him. He deserves it. He's a wretch, a brute. I hate him," and she forthwith brought such accusations against the Count, that Prilukoff, who was more madly in love with her than ever, promised to obey.

Having gained her object Mura now rejoined Count Kamarowsky, who was staying at the Hotel Bristol, Vienna. Some short time afterwards Prilukoff took apartments there and Kamarowsky consulted him regarding the life policy for £20,000. A well known Insurance Company in London refused it, but an Austrian Company jumped at it. Directly it was effected, Mura haunted Prilukoff, reminding him daily of his promise to kill the Count.

"I can't do it," Prilukoff pleaded, "I will beg, steal, do anything for you but murder."

"You fool," Mura said furiously. "I hate you, and unless you do as I tell you, I will denounce you to the Russian police for embezzling."

"I would rather that," Prilukoff moaned, "than murder."

Thus, unable to bring Prilukoff up to the scratch, Mura decided to try Naumoff. Accordingly she wrote to the Prince, saying that she was very anxious to see him. He came to Vienna on receipt of her letter and took apartments near the Hotel Bristol. Soon after his arrival, she called, and with tears streaming down her face told him that the Count was very cruel to her.

"He often beats me," she said, "and for nothing. See where he pinched me this morning," and baring one of her arms she showed Naumoff a bruise, caused no doubt by her having purposely collided with some heavy piece of furniture.

"Do you mean to say he did that?" Naumoff said, staring at the discoloured skin in horror.

Mura nodded. "That's nothing," she replied. "I've far worse bruises on my body."

"If only I could catch him at it," Naumoff exclaimed, clenching his fists.

"Why, what would you do?" Mura said.

"Thrash him, thrash him within an inch of his life," Naumoff responded furiously.

“That’s no use,” Mura replied coolly. “I want you to kill him. Will you?”

She raised her face enticingly as she spoke, and Naumoff kissing it all over, promised that he would. Mura quitted his presence smiling, and returning to the Count’s apartment, dressed for dinner. On this occasion she donned her most expensive jewels, those the Count had given her, and behaved towards him in an especially loving manner. After dinner, she sat perched on his knees in their private drawing-room, puffing her cigarette smoke in his face and playing a thousand pretty pranks on him. Little did he guess that, while she was thus doing, her mind all the time was busily engaged planning his death.

On the morrow he left for Venice, and at her bidding Naumoff and Prilukoff followed him. In order that no suspicion should fall on her, she went to Kieff telling the unsuspecting Kamarowsky that she would rejoin him shortly.

On arriving in Venice the Count engaged private rooms at the Campo Santa Maria del Giglio. True to his promise to Mura, Naumoff, first ascertaining, of course, that the Count would be alone, forced himself into his presence and drawing his revolver fired at him five times in rapid succession. He fell instantly, but, although mortally wounded, he had sufficient strength to cry out :

“Shot and by my best friend. Had you no other way of avenging yourself, Nicholas? You know I have an

eight years old child that is left without a mother. You would leave him without a father, too."

Horried now at what he had done, Naumoff stood rooted to the ground.

"For God's sake, fly," Kamarowsky groaned, "not by the door or the servants may stop you, but by the window. Quick."

Realizing his danger, Naumoff acted upon this advice, and dropping from the window onto the ground, got away just in time. A few minutes more, and he would have been caught by the police, who had received an anonymous letter (from Mura) saying that murder would be done in the Hotel that night. The Police thus speedily got on Naumoff's track, but not content with arresting him, they arrested Mura and Prilukoff as well, charging them with being accessories to the murder. Mura pleaded entire innocence and threw all the onus of the crime on the two men. The Court that tried them, however, found all three guilty, and they were condemned to varying terms of penal servitude.

Mura died in prison. Certain feminist writers, who never see wrong in any woman, or pretend that they do not, try to excuse Mura on the grounds that there was insanity in her family, but on these grounds there is no excuse, since there is nothing in Mura Tarnowska's conduct to show that she was mad. On the contrary, there is much to prove that she was sane, the methods she employed to gain her ends being just as far-seeing and clever as they were infamous and cruel.

Some people may possibly set down one thing to her credit—namely, that she was picturesque, but even the most ardent admirer of this fascinating quality will hardly venture to affirm that a flair for the picturesque forms in any, let alone this, case a redeeming feature.

CHAPTER XII

A KISS AND A CURSE

SITUATED a little to the West of Lynton, a village on the North Coast of Devon, lies what is known as The Valley of the Rocks. It is hemmed in for the most part between sloping banks of grass, crowned with fantastically-carved rocks of all shapes and sizes ; and only, here and there, on the one side, is the line broken, revealing glimpses of the blue, glistening waters of the Bristol Channel. In summer the valley presents a pleasing spectacle being covered with a rich profusion of gorse, bracken and wild flowers, but in winter it takes on a sombre tone that, generally speaking, has a strangely depressing and almost repellent effect. As one might imagine there are all kinds of traditions and superstitions associated with it, and the historic story of the Lost Castle, connected, as it is, with a fatal kiss, is undoubtedly one of the most interesting. At a certain spot along one of the routes through the Valley the road is flanked on the one side by a rock styled the Devil's Cheese-Wring and on the other by The Castle Rock. The Castle Rock, so named from its resemblance to a castle, is really one huge rock on a heap of smaller ones ;

and the tradition, in which there is undoubtedly no small amount of truth, is that on the site of these rocks there was once a real castle that, by reason of a curse, mysteriously disappeared. The story, unquestionably true in parts, perhaps for the most part, is as follows :

One dark and stormy evening, many centuries ago, the porter at the outer entrance to the great Castle of the Valley of the Rocks, was startled by a loud knock on the iron-studded door. Wondering who on earth it could be, as visitors at that season, and especially at such a late hour, were very rare, he cautiously opened the door a few inches and peered out. At that moment there was a loud peal of thunder and in the vivid flash of lightning that followed almost immediately he saw a white face, gleaming under a black monkish hood. The next instant a highly-cultured voice begged in the Virgin's name for a night's shelter.

"I cannot say yes to thee till I have first consulted the Lady of the Castle," the porter said, "Come in here, while I send someone to acquaint her with your request." He threw the door wide open as he spoke, and the stranger stepping in, stood in the flickering lamp light. He was tall and spare, and from his attire appeared to be either a monk belonging to some foreign order, or an itinerant friar, of whom, at that period, there were legions tramping the country ; but there was something in his face, in his dark piercing eyes and thin, peculiarly-modelled mouth, as well as in his slight stoop and long queerly-curved fingers that the porter did not altogether

like. Moreover, both the hounds that were unusually quiet and well-behaved creatures shrunk away from him, as if scared, while the porter's grandchild, a wee mite not more than a year old, at once began to cry. All the same, the porter, true to his word, sent someone to apprise the Lady of the Castle of the stranger's request, and she, feeling impelled, she afterwards affirmed, in a way she could not explain, immediately went back with the messenger, in order to see for herself what the stranger who asked for a night's shelter was like. Upon her arrival, the man repeated his request, beseeching her not to turn him out on such a night, for, if she did, he would undoubtedly lose his way and perish. The lady, however, liking his looks even less than the porter had done, in curt peremptory tones, bad him begone at once, or suffer the penalty of a severe scourging. "But my lady," he pleaded, pointing to the window, "Look, on such a night one would not even turn out a dog." As he spoke there was a terrific crash overhead, whilst the next moment the whole room was illuminated with a pale, ghastly light, and the rain began to descend in torrents. "My lady," the stranger went on earnestly, "my lady, have pity. Send me not out into this storm, let me remain within these precincts, in some garret, dungeon or stable. I should be content so long as I have a roof over my head, my lady," and sinking on his knees he clasped one of her beautiful white hands in his and pressed it to his lips. Now there was something so cold and clammy in his touch that the lady felt

strangely repulsed. Moreover, she bitterly resented being kissed by a man, and such a queer-looking man, too, even though in so respectful and humble a fashion. It wounded her dignity, maddened her. "Get up," she exclaimed, wrenching her hand away, her beautiful brows at the same time contracting into a deep frown, whilst a cruel look darted from her eyes. "How dare you sully my skin with your lips. You have heard what I have said. Go, before I call my hirelings to ply their whips on you and, maybe, do you a worse injury. Go, right out from here into the blinding darkness, I care not whither." And raising her jewelled hand, she pointed at the door. There was now another tremendous crash of thunder, and with the lightning playing over his ashen countenance the stranger sprang to his feet and confronted her. "Woman," he shrieked, his voice hoarse with fury, "Woman, thou hast scorned my kisses. Fatal shall they prove to thee and thine. Listen, listen to what I have to say. All thine shall be mine till in the porch of a holy church a lady shall stand and beckon." He said no more but turning on his heels stepped out into the frightful darkness of the night. At the same moment a wind suddenly rose and with a dull melancholy sound, like the moaning of a lost soul, swept down, deep down into the Valley of the Rocks, until it was finally lost in the far distance. Then an owl hooted, and a swart raven disengaging itself from the blackened rafters of the roof, from whose shelter the stranger had just been driven, fluttered away with a

loud croak. But the Lady of the Castle still stood in the same spot, her bosom heaving and her long blue eyes blazing with anger. "Oh," she said at length between her teeth, "Oh, if only he would repeat those words in my presence, I would have him whipped, whipped till all the skin on his back peeled off. How dare he!" and stamping her feet with rage she returned to her own apartment. When morning came and all the countryside once again lay basking in the bright sunshine, the Lady of the Castle caused a careful search to be made for the stranger, with orders that, when found, he should be brought back to the Castle, if necessary by force, and handed over to the official tormentors. She had, she declared, thought out a special punishment for him. Despite the fact, however, that her emissaries looked and inquired everywhere, no trace of him could be discovered, and it was generally surmised that he had fallen into the sea and perished. Several years passed and then, one day, the lady's husband, a handsome and stalwart baron, returned home from abroad. He had not been back in the Valley of the Rocks long, however, before everyone noticed a marked change in him. Instead of being lively and amiable he was moody and taciturn, and, moreover, often flew into a violent temper at the smallest provocation. He himself realised the change and attributed it to something in the atmosphere of the Valley that he could feel acutely but could not analyse.

And the worst feature of this change in him was his

scorn of religion. Up to the time he went abroad he had always been devout and regular in his attendance at church ; and now he was just the reverse. Not only did he blaspheme and use dreadful language, but he finally committed the most terrible act of sacrilege. Accompanied by a number of his retainers he went one day to the Church he had been in the habit of attending, the Church of St. John, and, despite the piteous appeals of the priest in charge, had it ruthlessly demolished, whilst he carried off and subsequently appropriated for his own use the holy vessels from the altar. This act, of course, horrified everyone, and he found himself, in consequence, ostracised. Then came a weird and grim tragedy that for many years was never mentioned by the rustics of the district, save with bated breath.

One evening, during a storm, similar to that experienced on the night of the mysterious stranger's visit, a servant at the Castle, stealing noiselessly along one of the corridors chanced to see his master, the door of the latter's apartment being partly open, seated in front of a log fire, engaged apparently in a brown study. He passed on, but thinking he heard a noise behind him, he looked round, and was just in time see a man in black, clad from head to foot in the loose, flowing garment of a monk, enter his master's room. The appearance of this man tallied so exactly, according to the description he had been given, with that of the mysterious being who had cursed the Lady of the Castle, that he at once ran off to narrate the incident to his cronies in the

kitchen. He then hurried back to the baron's apartment, and finding the door of it closed, applied his ear cautiously to the keyhole. There was no sound ; all within was silent, silent as the grave. Thinking of some plausible excuse he at last ventured to knock, and, as there was no reply, he opened the door and peeped inside. A low murmur of thunder from without accompanied his actions, and to his infinite horror he saw in a sudden spasmodic flicker of firelight the figure of the baron lying at full length on the floor.

No one else was in the apartment. Scared almost out of his senses, the retainer flew back to the kitchen, and in a few minutes the whole household was astir, and had assembled on the scene. The baron was found to be dead. His face was all black and distorted, though whether from some sudden illness, a fit for example, or from strangulation, none could say. The general belief being, however, that the black monk, for such the stranger who had pronounced the curse was called, was in some way responsible for the tragedy, a hue and cry was at once raised, but, as before, not the slightest trace of him could be found.

Now the baron had two children, a son and a daughter, and the son believing that his father's death was due to the curse that had been inflicted on the family, resolved to go East and try and remove it by winning his spurs against the Saracens. He accordingly became a Crusader, and everything went well with him, till one eventful evening. The exact details of what occurred have not

been recorded, but it is surmised that on his return to the camp after a hard day's fighting, he was overwhelmed with dismay and astonishment at receiving a visit from the now notorious black monk, the mysterious author of the curse. It is thought that at first there was a violent outburst on the part of the baron's son, and that very possibly he resorted to force ; but, however that may be, it seems he was eventually pacified, and he and the monk became, to all appearances, great friends. They were constantly in one another's company, and the whole camp alluded to them, though rather grimly, as David and Jonathan. From that time onward, however, a most noticeable change was observed in the baron's son. It was simply a repetition of what had occurred in his father's case. From being genial and devout he speedily became wild, bad-tempered and dissolute.

Instead of praying he drank, drank recklessly, drank immoderately. He still fought bravely it is true, but with such careless devilry and abandonment that his comrades were appalled. He seemed like one possessed, possessed with an evil spirit. And all the while the black monk, instead of rebuking him, only goaded him on.

It was thus far that affairs had progressed when a temporary lull in the fighting occurred, and the baron's son thought fit to tear himself away from his orgies and return to Devon. Arriving at the Castle late one night, to his surprise, instead of finding everywhere ablaze with light in honour of his home-coming, all was dark and gloomy, and there was a most oppressive silence

in the air. Chilled with a presentiment of coming evil he approached the main door and rapped loudly on it with his mailed fist. He was answered by the porter, who in awe-stricken tones, for the unsavoury reputation he had acquired in the East had long since spread to England, informed him that both his mother and sister were dead and that only a few of the family retainers remained in the building. That accounted for the intense quiet. Filled with sadness the baron's son walked wearily to his old quarters in the Castle, and spent the rest of the day alone brooding bitterly over the past.

The following morning he awoke, and to his astonishment heard the chiming of far-off church bells, apparently ringing for service. Summoning one of the servants he asked him the meaning of it and learned for the first time that, during his absence in the East, a new church had been built in the valley in the place of the one his father had so sacrilegiously destroyed. A strange yearning to go there and hear mass once again came over him, and with such intensity that, quite unable to resist the impulse, he finally got up and dressing hastily, set off down the valley. His long strides soon carried him over the ground, and he was within a few yards of the church, when, to his surprise and consternation, who should suddenly tap him on the shoulder and bid him stop, but the black monk, his old companion in sin, whom he had begun to hope he had left behind for good in Palestine. Directly the preliminary greeting was over, the monk tried to persuade him, instead of going to

church, to make tracks for the nearest town, where they could eat, drink and make merry, in other words, engage once more in an orgy ; and he was on the point of yielding, when, suddenly, he saw most distinctly (other people who happened to be passing by at the time also witnessed the occurrence) the figures of his dead mother and sister standing in the church porch beckoning to him to enter.

This decided him. Tearing himself away from the black monk, who tried his hardest to detain him, he rushed into the church and throwing himself before the altar appealed to Heaven to protect him from the Powers of Evil. What followed reads almost like a nightmare, and yet tradition and various records vouch for it. The black monk, apparently furious that his power, mental or spiritual, perhaps both, over the baron's son, was now at an end, for according to the word of his own curse, it was destined to terminate when "in the porch of Holy Church a lady should stand and beckon," followed quickly on the heels of his quarry, the returned and reformed prodigal. Stalking up the aisle, to the great dismay of priest and congregation alike, he halted behind the still kneeling man. For a moment or so there was a tense silence, and then, raising his voice almost to a shriek, the strange, cowed creature uttered some queer anathema in an odd, unknown tongue, at the same time stamping his feet angrily. This was followed by another brief spell of silence. Then the most appalling darkness, accompanied by a low

rumbling sound and a sickening sensation, as if the floor of the building were rising and falling, and then, from afar off, an abrupt crash. When sunshine once again returned, the black monk had gone ; and as soon as the congregation had recovered from their fright, they filed out of the church and went to their respective homes. But, lo and behold, when the baron's son came within sight of where his home should have been, all that he beheld in its place was a great pile of queerly-fashioned black rock, which folk still style the Castle Rock. Apparently his ancestral home had been entirely demolished by what was generally thought to have been an earthquake, a not altogether unknown occurrence in those parts. The black monk was never seen again, and opinion was divided as to his identity. While some believed him to have been one of those black magicians who were, if there is any truth in history, numerous enough in those days, others maintained he was nothing human, but a wandering spirit, a spirit of undiluted evil, perhaps Satan himself.

P.S.—The Castle Rock has a strangely blasted appearance and its whole atmosphere, especially at night, strongly suggests a peculiarly sinister but, at the same time, melancholy influence.

CHAPTER XIII

THE MARBLE HEAD*

MANY of the old Italian families are either haunted or cursed, sometimes both, and the once-powerful House of Davanzati would seem to have been no exception to the rule. The Palace Davanzati in the Via Porta Rossa, Florence, was their headquarters, and their coat of arms, a most imposing device, showed a lion rampant on a blue and orange field. A number of priori and gonfalionieri, besides many ambassadors and men of valorous deeds, belonged to this family, but more remarkable, perhaps, than anything else in connection with it, is a tradition, which, not very many years ago, was attested to in the following manner: Mdlle. Maria della Stufa, a young lady, describing herself as a person possessed of great courage and steadiness of nerves, advertized in an Italian paper her willingness to take charge of an invalid, either infirm or imbecile; and to her delight, in the course of a day or two, she received a letter from a lady named Davanzati, requesting an interview. Mdlle. Stufa, in response, set out to call on Madame Davanzati and found that she lived in one of

* My authority for this story is an Italian lady whom I met in Paris. She declared that it was absolutely true, and only gave me permission to reproduce it, conditionally that I substituted fictitious names both for places and persons for the real ones. This I have done.

the oldest houses in the city, in a terrace that backed onto the river Arno, close to the Ponte Santa Trinita. The houses immediately adjoining it were empty, and they, in conjunction with the one in which Madame Davanzati resided, presented an appearance so unprepossessing and sinister that Mdlle. Stufa, despite her habitual fortitude and resolution, drew back, debating whether after all she should call upon Madame Davanzati or not. At last, however, she rapped, and, in a few moments, the door was opened by a very sweet and charming lady, who, on hearing her visitor's name, at once invited her in. Mdlle. Stufa's first impression of the interior of the house was not reassuring. Although the thoroughfare outside teemed with life, as soon as the front door was closed, not a sound of any kind could be heard, and owing to a certain sense of gloom and solitude, which seemed to pervade the whole house, it might well, at least so Maria thought, have been situated in the depths of some far West Forest or even in the Catacombs. Completely overcome however, by the kind demeanour of its owner, for Madame Davanzati, it transpired, had answered the door herself, Maria followed her across the handsomely-furnished hall to a small apartment, which, to her surprise, looked really cheerful in the glow of a good fire.

Begging Mdlle. Stufa to be seated Madame Davanzati proceeded to ask her a number of questions. How old was she? Had she parents? Was she strong? Were her nerves really very steady? What experience had

she, and so on. Then, apparently satisfied with Mdlle. Stufa's replies, Madame Davanzati volunteered certain information relating to herself. She said she was practically alone in the house, owing to the fact that it was reputed to be haunted, which made it extremely difficult to keep any servants, and she was the sole custodian of a creature that was very dreadful, so dreadful, in fact, that to undertake the charge of it, which she wished Mdlle. Stufa to do, necessitated almost super-human nerve, and she asked again if Mdlle. Stufa was, as she had stated, unusually courageous. She spoke so impressively and almost ominously that Mdlle. Stufa felt most distinctly and unpleasantly thrilled ; but her anxiety to be earning money was so great that she waved aside all apprehension and said, " Yes, she was prepared to face anything."

" Very well then," Madame Davanzati replied with a smile, " Follow me. But first of all let me tell you that when you see your charge you must on no account show any fear. The slightest sign of nervousness on your part would arouse antagonism and your life might be endangered."

She then led Mdlle. Stufa down a winding stone staircase and narrow passage till they came to a door which, after warning her companion to be prepared, she unlocked and threw open. At first Maria saw nothing but a pile of clothes in the corner of a scantily-furnished room. Then, suddenly, from this pile there arose a head. It was human in general structure, but a kind of curved

and horny projection, something like a bird's beak, served for a nose, and immediately below it gaped an enormous toad-like mouth. Indeed the latter was rendered all the more toad-like by its proximity to a very full throat, a sort of pouch, which was of a curiously-mottled hue. The eyes also were peculiar. Apparently they had no lids, and were very prominent; yellow in colour, and somewhat obliquely set.

Mdlle. Stufa had braced herself up to see something startling, but this outdid her wildest imagination, and the shock was so great that it was with the very greatest difficulty that she pulled herself together, and concealed her terror.

"It's all right," Madame Davanzati said soothingly, addressing the creature. "It's all right. I have only brought a friend to see you." Then, whispering, she said to Mdlle. Stufa, "It likes you. Have you the courage to lift it? Try."

With a frightful effort Mdlle. Stufa conquered her repulsion and approaching her future charge put her arms round it and tried to raise it, but failed. Also, unfortunately, in the attempt that had been made to raise the creature, its body was disclosed to view, and Mdlle. Stufa received another shock. Hitherto it had been resting on its arms, with its legs hunched up in front of it, in the manner of a toad. However, sick as she felt, Mdlle. Stufa, again embracing the creature with her arms, was bracing herself up to make another attempt at lifting it, when it suddenly threw back its

head and emitted a sound that was absolutely non-human, a cross between a hoot and a croak. This was the climax. Dropping it, as if she had been shot, Mdle. Stufa sprang back in undisguised terror, and, as she did so, it uttered a hideous scream, its eyes at the same time blazing with satanical fury.

“Run, run,” Madame Davanzati whispered, “It is all over now, and there is no time to lose.”

But Mdle. Stufa needed no bidding. She made for the door, and had barely reached it, when the creature with another devilish scream leaped in a toad-like fashion after her. Luckily, Madame Davanzati retained her presence of mind, and following Mdle. Stufa out of the room, in the very nick of time, swung the door to in the creature's face. Then, quite calmly and without evincing any displeasure or annoyance, she asked Mdle. Stufa, who was trembling all over, to accompany her to the drawing-room.

“In order to explain to you what has just occurred,” she said, as soon as they were seated, and Maria had to some extent recovered, “I must tell you what happened, according to tradition, a great many years ago. If it will interest you, I will relate it in full. At that time, in the Middle Ages, there lived, in what is now the Piazza della Signoria, a certain member of that branch of the Davanzati to which my husband belonged, named Lorenzo Davanzati. He was a widower with three children, Michel, Giotto and Antonio. Well, father and sons lived happily together, till one day, or rather night,

an event occurred that soon resulted in discord, and eventually led to one of the most terrible curses that has ever been inflicted on humanity. One evening Michel Davanzati visited some friends of his in the Piazza San Lorenzo. They were gay, dashing youths, sons of one of the leading Florentine families, and had more money and freedom than was good for them. The evening began with dancing, which apparently was then almost as much a craze as it is now; supper followed, and after that, noise, and racket, and wine, so much wine, indeed, that when the guests came to depart, they found themselves not a little unsteady on their legs. Michel, at any rate, so it was said, had drunk so unsparingly of Amontillado, that, as he staggered through the dark square on his way home, his head swam and his limbs swayed. Well," Madame Davanzati went on, after a slight pause, in which she seemed to be straining her ears to catch some far-off sound, "naturally enough, perhaps, he lost his way, and instead of arriving in due course at home in the Piazza della Signoria, he found himself in a dark cut-throat-looking alley on the banks of the Arno. His close proximity to the dreary-looking river, upon which the moon was shining with a white and ghostly glow, had somewhat the same effect on him as a cold douche, and consequently his addled brain to a large extent cleared. Hence, halting abruptly he was looking around, uncertain which way to take, when a gondola on the opposite bank of the river, suddenly attracted his attention. It was practically stationary,

and in it, a woman and two men were seemingly engaged in a desperate struggle. A moment later, the woman screamed for help, and the two men seizing hold of her hurled her overboard. Like all the Davanzati, Michel was no coward, and instantly divesting himself of his coat and boots he swam to the rescue. A few seconds sufficed to bring him alongside the woman, and clutching her by the hair, just as she was sinking for the second time, he speedily towed her ashore. She was quite a girl, slim and very pretty, with the wondrous red hair artists rave about, and deep violet eyes. Michel was fascinated. He could not remove his gaze from her, and as soon as she had sufficiently recovered, he begged her to accompany him to his parents' house, and have food and rest and a change of garments. She assented, and while they were hastening thither, she told him what had happened. She said she was Lucina Albizi, an orphan, that her home was in Venice, and that she had come to Florence, merely out of curiosity, to see the famous Art Centre, about which she had heard so much. 'Early this evening,' she continued, 'I went to service in Il Duomo, and feeling I wanted some fresh air afterwards I hired a gondola from two men, just below the Ponte Vecchio. All went well, until arriving at the spot where you saw us, the men suddenly demanded my purse and my jewels. I refused to yield them, and when one of the men tried to catch hold of me, I stabbed him in the arm with my poniard. That maddened them both, and in their fury, apparently forgetting all about

my property, they flung themselves on me and threw me overboard.'

" 'The wretches,' Michel exclaimed hotly, 'they ought to be hanged for that. How lucky that I happened to see you.'

" 'It was, indeed,' Lucina replied, clasping Michel's hand in her own, and pressing it warmly, 'I can never thank you enough for risking your life to save me.'

" 'Oh, that was nothing,' Michel replied, and raising her fingers to his lips and kissing them, he murmured, 'I would do anything, risk anything for one as fair as you.'

" On arriving at the Piazza della Signoria, Michel introduced her to his father, who upon seeing the plight she was in received her kindly; but he was certainly surprised when, a few days later, Michel informed him that he wished to make Lucina his wife. With all the pride of a leading Florentine family he protested. The girl, he said, was of no extraction—(that she was an orphan was all the information she could or would give them concerning herself) and that Michel should marry a nobody, and perhaps worse, was not for one moment to be thought of. However, Michel had made up his mind, and his father finding that he could not dissuade him from his purpose, at length agreed to countenance his marriage with the orphan, conditionally that he and she, after they were married, should remain with him till he died. He was old, he said, and his span of life was pretty nearly run out. Well," Madame Davanzati con-

tinued, again looking towards the door with an anxious and somewhat startled expression, "Michel and his fiancée agreed to this, and the following day all Florence was discussing the engagement of the handsome heir of the Davanzati and the beautiful red-headed Venetian. The marriage was celebrated in due course. It took place at Il Duomo, and representatives of all the most famous Florentine families were there, the Ferucci, Pazzi, Buondelmonte, Strozzi and many others. The cake that figured in the centre of the supper table was made by the Duke of Milan's chef, who chanced to be in Florence at the time, while certain of the wine bottled in Naples was said to be at least a hundred years old. The table simply groaned with the weight of so many plates and dishes made of solid gold, while the jewels worn by the ladies created a brilliance that was almost too dazzling to behold. I tell you all this, child," Madame Davanzati remarked, "merely to help you to understand what a truly magnificent affair the wedding feast was said to be. Apparently the leading Florentines in those times lived after the manner of princes. There is nothing like it nowadays. Well, everything passed off without a hitch, and the wedding over, the husband and wife settled down in the old home. For some time nothing of any moment occurred. Then, one morning, Lucina came to Michel with a troubled look on her pretty face.

" 'Dearest,' she said, 'why is that room at the end of the passage on the ground floor always kept locked?'

" 'I can't tell you,' Michel exclaimed, turning very

pale and stammering, 'it has always been kept locked by my parents' wish.'

" 'But you know?' Lucina persisted.

" 'Yes,' Michel responded.

" 'Then, tell me,' Lucina purred, stroking his cheeks with her dainty white fingers. 'Tell me, beloved, and I will reward you with a kiss.'

" Michel shook his head.

" 'I am afraid I cannot,' he said. 'If I did my father would never forgive me. Besides, I have sworn by all that is holy that I will never reveal our secret.'

" 'But I am your wife—your wife that loves and adores you,' Lucina observed, still caressing him. 'Tell me.'

" But Michel refused, and Lucina, after upbraiding him severely, went away in a pet. Two days later she again approached him on the subject, and, on again meeting with a rebuff, she flew into a violent temper and slapped his face. Then she kept out of his way for a long time and sulked. It was all a great trial, of course, both for Michel and his father, but they bore it patiently, hoping that their continued kindness and forbearance would eventually bring the girl to a better state of mind. Well, this went on for some weeks. Then Michel was suddenly called away from home to attend a conference at Genoa, and directly he was gone, Lucina, with evil in her heart, set out to consult a woman who was said to be a sorceress. About this time, I must tell you, alleged witchcraft was very common throughout Europe, and the witch

whom Lucina was about to consult was visited in secret by half the fashionable ladies in Florence. She lived in a little wooden house on the Ponte Vacchio, and when Lucina arrived there and explained the object of her visit, namely, to find out the secret of the locked-up room in her father-in-law's house, she said, 'I cannot tell you here. You must come with me to the field outside the town, where I hold my sabbats.' She then conducted Lucina through a number of narrow, winding streets to a meadow adjoining a dark and sinister-looking wood on the outskirts of Florence. Here she halted, and was about to speak, when a civetta or small owl suddenly hooted. The noise sounded so near and was so unexpected that Lucina, strong-nerved as she was, started. 'Don't be afraid, dearie,' the sorceress said, 'it's only one of my familiars. Now, see here,' and producing a goblet of coloured glass from the bag she carried with her, she poured some fluid into it from a phial, and then set the goblet on a stone.

" 'I am going to summon the owl and a swallow,' she went on, 'and if the swallow shall alight first on the edge of this stone and dip its beak into the goblet, it will be a sign to me of success, and if the owl—failure.'

" She then made passes in the air with her left hand, muttering at the same time something that was wholly unintelligible to Lucina, and then, after a silence on her part that lasted several minutes, a swallow flew on to the edge of the stone and plunged its beak into the goblet.

" 'Good,' she exclaimed, 'now I can tell you what you

want to know. The room that is kept so carefully locked in your father-in-law's house contains a vast treasure, diamonds, pearls, rubies, emeralds, gold and silver. I can see it spread out on a round table standing in the centre of the room, and also stacked up in a heap against the wainscotting. But it is not intended for you, dearie, at least not nearly all of it, only a very tiny portion, the bulk goes to someone else.'

" 'Ah,' Lucina said, 'I thought as much. Go on, tell me more.'

" 'You don't love your husband,' the sorceress continued, staring hard at her, as if she would like to look right into her soul. 'There is some other man, and it is he who holds your heart.'

" 'I didn't come to consult you about my past,' Lucina said with an angry flush, 'but about the future. I want that locked-up treasure. How can I obtain it?'

"The sorceress eyed her narrowly. 'There is only one way, lovie,' she exclaimed at last. Then, after a slight pause, 'Standing in an alcove in the hall of your father-in-law's house there's a head carved in marble. It represents Bianca, the beautiful wife of Lorenzo Davanzati, who died five years ago. Now, as you probably know, it is the custom of every member of the family to kiss the lips of that marble image, every night before they go to bed, just as they used to kiss the lips of its living counterpart.'

" 'Well,' Lucina exclaimed coldly, 'that does not interest me.'

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" ' Well,' Lucina exclaimed coldly, ' that does not interest me.'

“ ‘It should interest you very much, dearie,’ the sorceress smiled, ‘if you follow my advice, and my advice is that you buy one of my famous magic lotions, and smear the lips of the head well with it.’

“ ‘But what effect will it have ?’ Lucina asked, her heart beating furiously.

“ ‘Just the effect you want, dearie,’ the sorceress replied, taking one of Lucina’s beautiful white hands in her own skinny ones and stroking it. ‘I understand you.’ The two women looked hard at one another, and for a while neither of them spoke. ‘But when the first one falls asleep after kissing the lips,’ Lucina said at length, ‘won’t the other suspect ?’

“ ‘They won’t suspect the lips,’ the sorceress grinned, ‘you need have no fear of that, dearie. Don’t spare your lotion on them, and all will be well.’

“ ‘Are you sure I shan’t be found out ?’ Lucina whispered, a dreadful expression in her eyes.

“ ‘There’s not the slightest chance of it,’ the sorceress replied, ‘more than a score of the best-dressed women in Florence have used it to get rid of tiresome husbands, and they know they can trust me. My lotions work swiftly, and leave no traces. Death will be ascribed to heart failure.’

“ ‘But could it be ascribed so in every case ?’ Lucina faltered.

“ ‘Yes, in every case,’ the sorceress replied, and an owl from close at hand screeching at that moment, seemed to echo her words. For some moments Lucina

stood still, thinking ; while the sorceress watched her with a curious, unchanging smile.

“ ‘ I’ll have the lotion,’ Lucina said at length. ‘ What is your charge ? ’

“ ‘ Give me the ruby ring on your left hand,’ the sorceress responded, ‘ and your earrings. That is all I want.’

“ ‘ But they are worth a small fortune,’ Lucina said indignantly.

“ ‘ Yes, a small one dearie,’ the sorceress remarked soothingly, ‘ but I am helping you to get a big one, and once in possession of this fortune, you may set your cap at the Duke of Milan or even His Royal Highness, the King of France. A dowry, such as you will have, can’t be had every day, even by Kings.’

“ ‘ Are you quite sure about this treasure ? Is there really as much as you say in that room ? ’ Lucina inquired.

“ ‘ Most certainly there is,’ was the immediate response, ‘ the Powers behind the Scenes never tell me wrong. Now, will you have the lotion ? ’

“ ‘ Yes, I will,’ Lucina replied.

“ The sorceress then gave her a phial containing some colourless liquid and told her exactly how to use it.”

“ The wretch ! ” Mdlle. Stufa ejaculated with a shudder.

“ There were many like her,” Madame Davanzati said calmly, “ but I must get on with my story. The following evening, while Lorenzo Davanzati and his sons

were still sitting over their wine in the dining-room of their home, Lucina stole into the hall, and after making sure no one was about, approached the marble head representing that of the defunct Bianca, and smeared the beautifully-chiselled lips with the lotion the sorceress had sold her. Once or twice she paused, fancying she heard footsteps, and her heart almost ceased beating, but the alarms proved to be false, and she accomplished her deed without detection. With a smile of relief she sped softly to her boudoir, and after draining a goblet of wine, sat in front of the mirror and rearranged her curls.

“Two hours later Giotto and Antonio Davanzati came into the hall and going up to the marble head kissed the lips with the greatest affection and reverence. They then went to bed, but hardly had they entered the apartment they shared than they were seized with the most excruciating pains, and within a few minutes both were dead.

“Shortly afterwards, Lucina, anxious to see if the lotion had taken effect, stole into the room and was overjoyed at the spectacle she beheld. Bending over the inanimate bodies of her victims, she peered curiously into their white, convulsed faces.*

“‘Boys,’ she said to herself, ‘grow into men. They belong to the same sex. I hate them one and all. Bah,’ and raising one of her dainty little feet, clad in a very

* In 1659 Hieronyma Spara, a disciple of Typhania, the notorious poisoner formed a league in Rome for getting rid of husbands. Hundreds of men were got rid of in this fashion.

high-heeled satin shoe, she gave each of the bodies a spiteful kick and then hurriedly left the room. Stealing softly down the great oak staircase leading into the central hall, she hid herself behind a curtain and watched for Lorenzo.

“It was close on midnight when he at length appeared, walking somewhat unsteadily, for the wine the Duke of Palermo had given him was good, and he had been tempted to drink, perhaps, more freely than he was wont. However, for all that, it was with an air of the most profound respect that he approached the head and impressed a kiss upon its cold, irresponsive mouth. Lucina watched him as a cat watches a mouse or a spider a fly, and when he had ceased kissing the marble image, she followed him and concealed herself on the landing, outside his bedroom door. She had not been there long before she heard him moaning. ‘Good!’ she muttered to herself with a chuckle, ‘it’s begun to take effect. You’ll soon be dead, my dear, detestable father-in-law.’ She waited for some minutes, until, in fact, the moaning ceased, and then, unable to curb her impatience any longer, she opened Lorenzo’s door, as noiselessly as she could, and quietly stepped into the room. She found him, contrary to her expectation, still alive, but he was writhing on the floor in the most fearful agony, and the moment he saw her, he implored her to fetch a doctor. But Lucina, of course, only laughed in his face and bending over him searched in his pockets for the key of the Mystery Room, which one of the

servants had told her he always carried about with him concealed on his person. Eventually she found several keys, and leaving Lorenzo still on the floor, and apparently speechless with pain, she ran trembling all over with excitement to the locked apartment. To her infinite joy one of the keys opened the door and with a cry of delight she bounced in. Only, however, to stagger back aghast. There was no round table, no treasure, neither precious stones nor gold—but only a dreadful-looking creature—the counterpart, Mdle. Stufa, of the one you have just seen—lying huddled up in a corner. Upon hearing her scream, it rushed at her in a fury, and doubtless she would have been badly hurt, had not Michel suddenly turned up; whereupon it immediately shrank back into its corner. Without a word, Michel dragged Lucina out of the room, and as he locked the door, Lorenzo, white as a corpse, appeared upon the scene.

“ ‘Lucina, cruel Lucina,’ he cried, ‘my beloved children, Giotto and Antonio, who never did thee any harm are dead; and I, thy victim also, am about to die. Three lives hast thou taken to gain a treasure, and bitterly art thou disappointed. Thy punishment will now begin. Henceforth thy sleep at night shall ever be accompanied by tormenting dreams, and more than that. Listen. The thing in yonder room,’ and he pointed to the locked apartment, ‘was the result of a shock my wife received when giving birth to a child, and naturally we kept the unhappy affair a secret. For

thy abominable deeds, the outcome of thy curiosity and greed, providence has now permitted me to perpetuate this monstrosity in the race which springs from thee and thy cursed blood. Thy child will be in its image, and every seventh generation will see one like it, till thy breed is extinct.'

"Having thus said, Lorenzo fell in a heap to the ground, and expired, and Lucina, recovering her presence of mind, immediately announced that her dear father-in-law had been wandering in his mind and that she was, of course, entirely innocent of the charges he had made against her.

"Strange as it may seem, Michel, her husband, believed her. But, all the same, the curse took effect, for shortly after its pronouncement Lucina gave birth to a creature similar to that in the locked room; and as she could never sleep without dreaming of horrors, she died at a very early age of mental exhaustion. And ever since," Madame Davanzati added in conclusion, "a similar monstrosity has been reproduced in the family, once in every seven generations. Thank God, however, with my death and that of the unhappy creature you saw, this branch of the Davanzati ends."

"And the curse will have worked itself out?" Mdlle. Stufa remarked.

"Yes," Madame Davanzati replied, "the curse ends, too."

CHAPTER XIV

THE KISS IN THE THEATRE

NOT a great many years ago there lived in Clifton, Bristol, a handsome widow with an only child, then a beautiful young girl of about seventeen years of age. This widow, whom I will call Madame Delmont,* belonged to a very old French family, but stress of circumstances aggravated, I believe, by the Franco-German War of 1870, had compelled her to quit her native shores and seek some means of livelihood in England. Hence, she came to Clifton, and either in or near Royal York Crescent, then, as now, one of the most select parts of the Town, started a school for the daughters of gentle people. My relatives in Clifton knew her fairly intimately, and though a very young child at the time, I have distinct recollections of travelling on the same boat with Madame Delmont and her daughter Amy to Ilfracombe, which was then little more than a village and not, of course, a tripper-ridden town as it is now. Amy was rather a tall girl, with dark hair, pretty neat features, and very beautiful dark eyes, and a cousin of mine, barely out of his teens, who was staying with us

* Fictitious names are used in this story which is in the main true.

at the time, and who had never seen Amy before, was so smitten, that, much to my disgust, for I had hoped to come in for a share of his attention, he had eyes and ears for no one else but her. Doubtless, well aware of the conquest she had made, Amy flirted desperately with him, and by the time we arrived in Ilfracombe, they were on the most friendly terms. Fate, however, ordained that the boy and girl friendship thus formed, and which might very easily have grown into something stronger, should not last, for Charlie was very abruptly recalled to his home in Ireland, and, as far as I am aware, he has never seen Amy since.

Though built on very graceful lines, with lovely hands and feet, Amy was an athletic girl, and her prowess in swimming, besides standing her in good stead, earned for her a considerable local reputation. It happened in this way. One windy day, when the sea was covered with white-crested waves, and no fishing boats were to be seen outside the little harbour, Amy, against the advice of her mother and friends, would go bathing. It was in vain the proprietor of the bathing machines remonstrated, Amy insisted on having one, and have one she did. Through an error on the part of someone, most likely herself, the machine went too far, and the tide having begun to recede, it was carried some distance out to sea with Amy in it. Not in the least degree dismayed, Amy climbed onto the roof and gaily waved her handkerchief to the anxious crowd collected on the beach. Then, when she felt she had gone far enough,

she dived into the brine and coolly swam ashore. Thus all ended well. To me as a little boy Amy was always very kind. Whenever I met her with my nurse on the beach, she stopped and spoke, and being, perhaps, an unusually susceptible and impressionable child, I became very fond of her. I have vague recollections of her walking out into the sea one day to rescue a blue and white ship of mine that had got into grave difficulties, and of her rescuing me, one baking afternoon, from some small town boys who were proceeding to molest me, the moment my nurse's back was turned. Very small things in themselves, no doubt, but sufficient to endear her in my eyes for ever. Indeed, I have never forgotten her, and when, a year or two later, I learned that she had participated in a very dreadful tragedy I was immeasurably shocked.

For those times Amy was somewhat of a novelty. Fond of outdoor sports, she was also fond of study, and had passed several examinations held in connection with the higher education of women. I strongly suspect that she was feministically inclined, and had she lived in these days she would probably have thrown in her lot with the Feminists and become one of their leaders, and, yet, notwithstanding the something in her which rather suggested a latent dislike of men, she constantly flirted with them and derived every possible amusement from their company. Such women are to be counted by the scores now-a-days, when Feminism encourages girls to play fast and loose with men and use them only

as their puppets, but in those now despised Victorian days such characters did not meet with the approval of the generality of people and were regarded with something akin to suspicion. It was so in the present instance, for I have distinct recollections of hearing Amy alluded to as an incorrigible flirt and one who was altogether beyond the pale. I do not think her mother had any control over her, and I feel pretty sure that with regard to her love affairs Amy had her own way entirely. Yet she does not appear to have done anything actually disreputable until the commencement of the affair, which ended, as I have already stated, in tragedy.

I am not acquainted with the circumstances in which she first met Mr. J. McCoy Greene, who was an Irishman, but that first meeting I do know resulted in a speedy marriage. Greene was tremendously in love; but whatever infatuation Amy may have had for her husband soon wore off and she treated his affection with the utmost indifference. Subsequent events suggested she was not very fond of her child, a boy. It seems strange that a girl who was kind to a little boy like me, should have developed into an indifferent mother. Possibly, however, I exaggerated her kindness. Even as a small child I was a great admirer of a pretty face, and because Amy's style of beauty happened to appeal to me, I idealized her. It may have been so, or possibly her character underwent a change and the warm-hearted, unsophisticated girl of seventeen

became a cold and calculating woman at the age of one or two and twenty. Even a few years can, and often do, bring about strange alterations and developments. I have known an apparently kind person suddenly become a very cruel one, and a genial, jolly individual suddenly become sullen and morose. None of us know what qualities of character lie latent in us, and the development of these latent qualities is merely a matter of circumstance and, perhaps, health, for, undoubtedly, the physical exercises a considerable influence on the mentality. At any rate, in Amy's case something, either health or circumstances, or, perhaps, a combination of both converted a seemingly kind-hearted, rollicksome girl into a somewhat peevish, unfriendly and discontented woman; for that is certainly what she appeared to be to the majority of her fellow passengers on board the *s.s. Gavigne*, during the first few days of their passage from Plymouth to Melbourne. On this voyage she and her husband, who was a good-looking Irishman, above the average height and correspondingly dignified in appearance, attracted much attention. Glances followed them wherever they went. "He is devoted to her but she does not seem to care much for him" were the usual comments passed on them, and they were overheard one day by a handsome, well-dressed Frenchman named Soutre. M. Soutre, who was on his way to the Great Exhibition at Melbourne, had been attracted by Mrs. Greene at first sight. Hers was a style of beauty that particularly appealed to him, and

he made up his mind, as soon as he saw her, to cultivate her acquaintance. The remarks he overheard on all sides suggested possibilities, and he determined to lose no time in furthering his plans. Obviously, a past-master in the art of love-making, he sat opposite her that night at dinner, and saw enough in her glances, each time their eyes met, to encourage him in his efforts. A seat close hers on the deck after dinner, when the moon, and stars, and the great, glistening expanse of still and silent water gave glamour to the night, offered the opportunity he sought, and it was not long before he got into conversation with her.

Greene, who was of an extremely jealous disposition, was very cool to M. Soutre and tried to persuade Amy to be the same, but failed. She was clearly taken with the fascinating Frenchman and met his advances more than half-way.

A gentle pressure of the hand, when Greene's attention was directed elsewhere, was followed by a whispered promise to meet again later in another part of the deck. Soutre then moved off, and Amy having inveigled Greene into playing cards with some of the passengers below deck, hastened to the trysting place to keep her appointment. Thus it was that the friendship between these two began. Soon, everyone on board was talking about them. Greene was furious. He commanded Amy to break with Soutre at once and have nothing more to do with him. "I shan't," Amy replied* "I like him

* Or words to that effect.

far better than I like you. I didn't know my mind properly when you worried me into marrying you."

"Do you really mean that?" Greene stammered.

"Of course I do," Amy rejoined coolly. "Haven't I shown very clearly which of you two I prefer?"

"You'll be the death of me," Greene muttered hoarsely.

"Thank goodness for that," Amy laughed, "the sooner the better."

After that she flirted more desperately than ever with M. Soutre, and everyone on board waited in almost breathless expectancy to see what would happen. They were disappointed. Constant stormy interviews took place between Amy and her husband, but they were always in private. Greene commanded and threatened, Amy remained cool and defiant; and in the end she won. Greene invariably broke down and on his knees implored her to love him again. Her reply was as invariably a mocking laugh. The night before the ship reached Melbourne they had a final scene. "It's no use telling me I'm not to see M. Soutre after we land," she said, "I shall see him just as often as I please, for I have invited him to stay with us."

"What!" Greene cried, "you have dared to do so without my consent?"

"That much for your consent," Amy replied, snapping her pretty white fingers in his face. "If you want to divorce me, you can. I will furnish you with all the

evidence you need. I would infinitely rather be M. Soutre's mistress than remain your wife."*

Greene raised his hand to strike Amy, but dropping it at once, knelt instead at her feet. Swishing her gown in his face, she flounced out of the cabin and joined M. Soutre on deck.

On disembarking, Greene sought the advice of a well-known Melbourne solicitor, but the latter, for some reason or another, would not assist him in getting a divorce, although Amy had confessed everything to him. A terrible change now came over Greene. From being dejected and heart-broken, he now became sullen and morose. A dark scowl replaced his usual sad smile, and instead of carrying a stick he took to carrying a revolver. Amy saw all this but it made no difference whatsoever in her conduct. She was constantly with M. Soutre, and flirted openly with him before her husband. Then came the climax.

At dinner one night M. Soutre alluded to "The Huguenots," which was being performed at the Melbourne Opera House. "I hear," he said, "it is magnificent." Amy at once asked him to take her to see it. Greene protested, Amy laughed, and going to her bedroom put on her most becoming dress. Then, arm in arm with M. Soutre, she left the hotel, and, accompanied by him, drove to the Opera House. To Greene this was the last straw. Again and again he had been on the verge of striking Soutre, but something had always held him

* Actual words, *vide* contemporary Press accounts of case.

back. Now that something held him back no longer. All his jealousy, the jealousy of weeks, rushing to the surface swept all and everything before it. He had now only one desire, to kill, kill, kill. Hailing a hansom he drove to the Opera House. The cool night air gently fanning his brow gradually calmed him. His grip on the revolver relaxed, and when he got out at the Opera House, all thoughts of killing had passed away. He intended merely to join the lovers, and, if possible, act as a wet blanket. Speaking with apparent calm he inquired for them at the box office, and on learning which box they were in, he at once bought a ticket and hurried off to join them.

On reaching the door of their box, he looked through the little glass window, and was just in time to see M. Soutre take one of Amy's hands and press it fervently to his lips. At the sight of that kiss all his jealousy once again blazed forth. In an ungovernable fury he rushed into the box, and drawing his six-chambered revolver, fired first at Soutre, then at Amy, and lastly at himself. Of the three shots the last only proved fatal. M. Soutre received merely a flesh wound in the face. Amy suffered a trifle more severely. The bullet entering her head, just below her left ear, passed through the muscles of her neck. All three were taken to the hospital. Greene lingered for two or three days in great agony and then died. Amy, on recovering, immediately asked after Soutre, and expressed great satisfaction when she was told he was practically well. She made

no allusion to her husband, but later, upon being told that he was dead, she smiled and said :* “ I suppose I must now wear widow’s weeds ” ; and proceeding then to array herself in her most becoming attire, she asked one of the nurses to buy her some French novels—“ Not dull English stuff, something racy.”

* These were her actual words, *vide* “ Times,” Sept. 18th. 1880.

